THE ZODIAC QUEEN: PART ONE

ARIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GEMMA JAMES

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SUMMARY

Twelve men. A virgin queen. One arranged marriage.

The first time I met the boys of the Zodiac Brotherhood, I was forced to my knees for the introduction. Still grieving the death of my parents, I was a child queen, a pawn in my uncle's agenda for wealth and gain. As my guardian, he had the authority to arrange a marriage upon my eighteenth birthday.

That meeting took place six years ago.
Now those boys are powerful men.
Twelve virile men that want to own me.

And I must spend a month with each one.
Bending and yielding to their desires and commands.
Shedding pieces of my innocence so long as my virtue remains intact.

Because they want a virgin queen after the last month concludes, and my uncle plans to auction me off to the highest bidder.

Out of the twelve men, only one has my heart.
And only one can claim my hand in marriage.
If only it were up to me to decide.

Part 1 of The Zodiac Queen.

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Prologue

Crushing grief. It's all I know. All I feel.

The ache slithers through my soul, weighing down my bones and slicing me into a distorted version of the girl I used to know. Now there's just an apparition, a pale-faced creature whose flaxen braids belie a mature age of twelve. I hold my breath, afraid to breathe—as if the simple act of inhaling and exhaling will make this tragic reality *real*.

Each second crawls by in slow motion until my lungs burn for air. I suck in a soundless breath as movement surrounds me.

My uncle's feet hitting the floor in lazy, unhurried steps.

The burden of a stranger's gaze.

The dread that taints the air.

"You must be Novalee," says the stranger with the unfamiliar shiny black shoes.

I don't react to the statement, and Uncle Rowan's brows slash into fierce lines of disproval. "Please excuse my niece's reticent behavior. I'm afraid she hasn't been herself since the plane crash."

"It's quite understandable. Such a sudden tragedy."

They talk about me as if I'm not here. As if my shattered heart isn't bleeding all over the rug my mother loved when she was alive. I focus on the pattern underneath the pillow that cushions my knees, following the kaleidoscope of browns and royal blues as I smooth my sweaty palms down the front of the dress Rowan made me wear.

White for purity, I heard him mutter when he thought I wasn't listening.

He wanted me to look pretty for our guest, and even though I don't understand why I'm required to kneel in this stranger's presence, I don't mind because it means I can pretend he's not really here. I can be invisible like the heroines in my favorite fantasy books, cloaked by magic and imagination.

"Shall we get down to business?" asks the man standing next to my uncle. I give him a quick once-over. He's tall and broad, and I'm fascinated with the way his coppery hair catches the sunlight spilling through the arched windows in the sitting room. I've never seen such a color on a man before.

“Of course.” My uncle gestures toward the archway leading into the study where my father spent most of his evenings. “Right this way, if you will.”

They leave me on my knees, and I hear him ask the man with the copper hair if he would like a drink. For the next several minutes, the clinking of glasses and low voices filter into the sitting room through the ajar door, and I catch words that make my stomach sour with dread.

Words like *virginity* and *auction* and *marriage*. I fist my hands against my thighs, wishing I could roam the grounds with the birds and butterflies, but I don’t dare move from my designated spot on my dead mother’s prized rug.

Rowan is a strict enforcer, and I don’t want to experience the stinging bite of his leather belt like Faye did yesterday for disobeying an order. Faye is my age and a daughter of a servant, but she’s always been like a sister to me. We grew up together inside these walls, playing hide-and-seek in the countless rooms and halls. Before my parents’ plane went down last week, we had free rein of the mansion and the surrounding grounds.

Until Uncle Rowan arrived and changed everything.

My parents have only been gone a week, both graves heavy and fragrant with fresh soil and sorrowful bouquets, but my uncle leaped into taking charge of our lands before the sun sank below the horizon on the day of the wake. I’m the daughter of a king, and now that my parents are gone, I’m the queen of a nation. A powerless child queen, because as my guardian, Rowan holds all the power.

“Why in God’s name are you kneeling?” someone asks from behind me, his insolent male tone disturbing my misery. “You’re not in the presence of the chancellor, princess.”

I tilt my head and catch a hint of wild blond hair in my periphery. “My uncle told me to kneel.”

“Do you always do what you’re told?”

My brows pull together. “Don’t you?”

“Much to my father’s aggravation, no. But your obedience is admirable.”

“Obedience was important to my parents.”

“Then I suppose you’ll be a perfect little wife someday.”

The disdain in his voice piques my interest, and I pivot on my knees to face him. His gaze meets mine, shooting a strange flutter of awareness through my chest. He appears to be in his teens, and just as I suspected, his

dark blond hair surrounds his face in chaos, flopping over his forehead and threatening to hide his eyes.

And those sea-blue eyes are the reason for the sudden lack of air in my lungs. There's something about his stare that sends me into a trance. He circles me, footsteps slow and deliberate, and it reminds me of the way a lion preys on a prospective meal.

"Don't you want to get married someday?" I ask him, still wondering about his odd tone when he mentioned marriage.

His full lips slope into a frown. "What do you know about marriage? You're just a child." He gestures at my chest. "You don't even have a real set of tits yet."

Mortification heats my cheeks. "What an inappropriate thing to say!"

"The truth is rarely appropriate, princess."

"I'll kindly remind you I'm a queen, and you'll address me as such."

His snicker crawls down my spine with dark intent. "A queen on her knees. How…*appropriate*."

"Just go away," I snap, hating the petulance in my tone but helpless to mask it. He makes me want to grind my teeth, especially since I can't confront his rudeness with both feet planted firmly under me.

"Leave the sweet girl alone, Sebastian."

I startle at the presence of another boy. He halts in front of me, having come in from the gardens, same as the boy he called Sebastian. Through the open door, a breeze carries in the music of songbirds and the sweet aroma of plumeria, and once again, I wish to escape outside into the humid heat.

"I don't take orders from you," my tormentor fires back with that same irritated attitude I detected a few minutes ago.

"Someday, you will." The boy's coppery hair gives away his parentage, as does the authority in his tone. He seems older than his rude friend with the aqua gaze that makes my body warm and tingly in strange ways.

I avert my attention to the rug, assuming the older boy is the son of the man talking to my uncle in the other room.

Someone of great importance.

A leader.

Of course, I've heard whispers about the island up north where a group of powerful men reign in a circular tower twelve stories above the ground floor. I don't know the reason for their visit, but their presence scares me.

One by one, the sitting room fills with the opposite sex, ages ranging from early teens to adulthood. They surround me, eyes alight with curiosity.

“So this is her?” a dark-haired teenager asks.

“I expected her to be younger,” someone else says.

Laughter flits through the room, the deep gruff too mature to belong to a boy. “And I expected her to be older.” I catch the emerald gaze of the boy… *man*…who laughed at my age. He must be a decade older than me.

And now I’m fidgeting, twirling two tiny blond braids around my finger as I try not to squirm under their stares.

“By the time the queen turns eighteen,” the boy with the copper hair says, “the age difference won’t matter.” He closes the distance between us and covers my hand, putting a stop to my nervous braid-twirling. Returning my hands to my lap, I nibble my bottom lip as he pets the top of my head.

“What happens when I turn eighteen?”

He takes me by the chin, fingers warm and gentle. “Upon your eighteenth birthday, my queen, you’ll belong to us.”

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Chapter One

Present-day, March 21st

The road is smooth under the wheels of the limousine, unhindered by bumps or potholes. Not that I'd know much about either. I've been surrounded by the absolute best from the moment I came out of the womb. Artisan furniture made of quality wood and fine leather. Enough jewelry to match every hue of nail polish in existence. Collections of the latest couture—a wardrobe large enough to need its own wing.

It took several chests to contain even a tenth of my clothing. Uncle Rowan said he'd send the rest at a later date. In the meantime, he promised a shopping spree with my ladies after we settle on Zodiac Island. Maybe if I weren't visiting the small nation in metaphorical chains, the prospect of new clothing and jewels would excite me.

"It's so beautiful," Elise says, awe dripping from her tone as we pull between the iron gates of the estate that houses all twelve members of the Brotherhood. Eyes widening with excitement, she pushes her wispy blond bangs to the side to get a better look.

The castle-like structure sits atop a hillside. Arched mullion windows line the floors in neat, perfect rows, charming those who gaze upon the estate. It really is a gorgeous place, down to the ivory stonework. I can't help but turn away from the sight with a sickness in the pit of my gut.

"It looks like a prison," Faye gripes, her fuchsia-hued lips forming a scowl. Her words echo my thoughts.

Elise glances my way, rose coloring her cheeks, baby blues deepening with an apology. "I'm sorry. That was an insensitive thing to say."

"Don't apologize for appreciating beautiful architecture." I cross my right ankle over my left. "All we can do is make the best of the situation."

"It's so unfair," Faye complains in a harsh whisper. "You shouldn't have to go through this."

None of us should.

Though she didn't say the words, they flit through my mind anyway. It's what she meant, but as one of my ladies, she's been trained to put me first, to push aside her personal thoughts, feelings, and opinions in favor of my wants and needs.

Elise is ecstatic at the prospect of landing a husband on Zodiac Island. But Faye is here against her wishes, as am I. She was forced to leave the love of her life with the expectation that she marry above her station—an opportunity not gifted to many servants.

As we roll down the long driveway, trees rustle in the breeze on either side in blankets of grass. The lawns are lush and green from the abundant rain for which Zodiac Island is famous. Just behind the towering estate and past the cliffs, I spy the ocean. That endless stretch of water is the only thing that brightens this reality for me.

I've never lived so close to the sea. On the drive over from the Brotherhood's private airstrip, I spotted the most beautiful beaches, the waters a deep cobalt with miles of uncluttered sand inviting one to search for sand dollars and seashells.

Uncle Rowan promised I'd have some freedom on this God-forsaken chunk of rock—the chance to roam and explore. In theory, it's an alluring idea, but I can't stop the niggle of dread chasing me. The closer I come to meeting the chancellor, whom I'll spend the next month with, the more my belly roils with nervous energy. No amount of adventurous discovery on new soil will make this forced marriage worth it. Not considering the rumors about the Brotherhood that have run rampant on a global level.

Political corruption.

Sex scandals.

And the thing that worries me most—the gross negligence of women's rights.

As we come to a stop at the main entrance, I can't deny the fear gripping me. Palms clammy, I try to draw in a deep breath but fail.

Faye grasps my fingers and squeezes. "Just breathe. We're right here with you."

I've known about this inevitable day for six years. Six long years of my uncle drilling it into my brain at every turn, trying to prepare me so it would be easier to accept.

It's not, and I'm far from prepared.

We roll to a stop and the engine shuts off. The resulting quiet is as unsettling as my thoughts. Doors open and close, and seconds later, Rowan swings mine open. I glare at him through the hot tears flooding my eyes. Oh, how I despise those drops of weakness as they slip past my armor.

His stature is immovable, as is his will. "Dry your eyes, child."

“I’m not a child.”

“You’re right. You’re a grown lady, and it’s time you stop the theatrics and behave like the queen I trained you to be.”

“Don’t make me do this.” I bite my lip to keep from adding a whiny “please” at the end of that sentence. Despite what my uncle might think of me, I’m not this pathetic.

Not usually.

What I am is desperate…which is pathetic in its own right.

“It was done six years ago, Novalee.”

“Undo it.”

“That isn’t an option.”

The urge to run is strong. Craning my neck, I study my surroundings from the back seat of the vehicle. The grounds seem endless from this vantage point, but even if I hide amongst the trees long enough to evade, where will I go? I’m on foreign soil, the terrain unfamiliar, and finding a stranger willing—or stupid enough—to go against the Brotherhood by helping me will be next to impossible.

And it’s not like I haven’t tried running before.

“Don’t try it, child,” Rowan warns in a dark tone. “Running will only delay the inevitable and leave you unable to sit.” Gripping me by the arm, he drags me from the luxurious vehicle before letting the door slam shut with the kind of finality that inspires teeth-grinding.

I’m angry and indignant and desperate to stop the tears from escaping down my cheeks. What an utter fool I was in thinking I could get through this without falling apart. I’ve straddled the line of a nervous breakdown since I turned eighteen two months ago when my uncle and his men thwarted my last escape attempt. No amount of begging had saved me from a brutal session with Rowan’s whip, and it won’t save me from what he claims is my *duty*.

And he’s gone above and beyond over the years to make sure this day happens, going so far as to drive away anyone who might be an ally. Kitchen staff, servants, even Angeles, the old man who used to tend the gardens and was like a grandfather to me.

All of them, gone.

Save for my ladies, I’m alone in this. Faye and Elise exit the limo and flank me on either side, and the three of us stand as a united front. Their

presence is a comfort, but I still can't help but wish the ground would open and let the soil bury me.

Panic is just a few breaths away.

I've never been touched by a boy, and the thought of being at the mercy of twelve experienced men is horrifying. My only saving grace is the terms of the contract, which prohibits them from taking my virtue until the night of the wedding.

With a displeased frown, Rowan hands me a handkerchief. "You are minutes away from meeting Chancellor Castle. Don't embarrass yourself."

I yank his offering from his hand and dab at my wet eyes. "This is wrong. My parents wouldn't have wanted this for me."

"Your parents aren't here."

"Why are you doing this? Is it the money?"

"My dear, innocent Novalee. The money is a bonus, but while you're locked away here, serving the Brotherhood, you'll be out of sight and out of mind. Someone has to rule our lands."

After all the times I've pleaded for an answer, I'm shocked to get one now, and it's confirmation of what I suspected to be true. Uncle Rowan wants my title, and with me gone, he has a better chance of securing the permanent transfer of power. Twelve months is a long time to be absent, especially amid such political uncertainty.

"Come," he says, taking me by the arm as a young woman appears from the iron doors of the estate, dressed in full maid uniform. "The chancellor awaits." He urges me forward, and the metaphorical chains that bind me tighten to an intolerable level.

This is happening.

My ladies can't protect me from it.

My uncle refuses to stop it.

And the only two people who would have done anything to ensure my happiness—even if it meant moving the stars and planets—died six years ago.

As the maid ushers us into my prison for the next twelve months and beyond, I have no choice but to let destiny drag me into the den.

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Chapter Two

For a prison, the Zodiac Estate is nothing short of awe-inspiring. The grand foyer is open, light, and airy, and smack in the middle stands a white stone staircase. To my right, a waterfall cascades down a rocky wall.

“Wow,” Elise breathes, and I can’t help but share in her awe.

I tilt my head and squint from the bright rays pouring through the circular skylight which spans the foyer and second-floor atrium. The stained glass is sectioned into twelve slices—one representing each sign of the zodiac, from the ram to the fishes. It’s beautiful and immaculate and…

“It’s cold,” Faye says, plucking the word from my mind.

Gooseflesh erupts on my skin, and I’m not sure if it’s from the chilly breeze spilling into the foyer with our arrival, or the thought of what waits for me behind closed doors. Just past the wall of bubbling water, I spot an archway leading into what looks like an industrial-sized kitchen. The maid ushers us in the opposite direction, through a door on the left and down a long hallway, and we enter a library. My eyes widen at the sheer massiveness of the bookshelves—rows upon rows of spines showing a varied and eclectic collection.

A man rises from behind a desk, the wood heavy and dark with an edge of masculinity, and Uncle Rowan steps forward. “Chancellor, I’m honored to present my niece, Novalee Van Buren.”

The chancellor nods at me in greeting. “Welcome to Zodiac Island. You may call me Liam.”

Dipping my head in acknowledgment, I study him from beneath my lashes. His coppery hair niggles at a memory, digging at the layers of time until I recall the younger version of the man standing before me.

At age twelve, I didn’t quite grasp the devastating sexiness of Liam Castle, but now it hits me full-on, and I feel his hot-blooded gaze in every nerve ending.

“Do you remember me, Novalee?”

“I remember you.”

“You’ve grown into a beautiful woman.” His attention heats my skin under the white skirt and sweater Uncle Rowan insisted I wear.

“Thank you.”

He gestures toward his maid. “Selma, escort the queen’s ladies to their quarters to freshen up. Dinner begins at six.”

I cast an anxious glance at Faye and Elise. I want them at my side, a buffer between this imposing man and me. “I’d rather they stay.”

“You’ll be reunited soon enough.” His tone is decisive. Final. An authoritative nod of his beautiful head sends the maid into motion, and she escorts my ladies through the library door. An unsettling disquiet descends until Liam gestures toward a group of suede leather chairs. “Shall we sit?”

That’s when I spot a manila envelope sitting on a table. Undoubtedly, it’s the contract my uncle signed a week after my parents’ plane went down, promising my hand in marriage to the Zodiac Brotherhood.

Rowan places a palm at the small of my back, urging me forward. After we settle into the chairs—my uncle and I facing the chancellor—Liam removes several pieces of paper from the envelope and lays one on the table between us. The scrawl of Rowan’s signature ignites a deep ache in my gut. That ink is a reminder of all I lost.

I swallow hard. Not even six years can erase the reality of my parents’ deaths or the gaping hole their absence created in my life.

Liam removes a pen from the pocket of his expensive charcoal suit and hands it to Rowan. “As you discussed with my father six years ago, by signing, you declare Novalee has remained a virgin.”

I hold my breath as my uncle’s hand hovers over the line at the bottom. One flick of his wrist and a little ink, and life as I know it will change forever. That ink will be the start of the end.

Fighting tears, I watch my uncle scrawl his name across the bottom. He sets the pen down carefully, paying small homage to the significance of this moment and the destruction ricocheting through my heart.

“Excellent,” Liam says as he stands. “Before you take your leave, I need a show of good faith from Novalee.”

I’m trying not to wither under the chancellor’s scrutinous stare when my uncle asks the only question in my head.

“What do you have in mind?”

Liam’s light brown eyes refuse to waver from mine. “A sexual favor as a show of her commitment to the contract. Her virginity will remain intact, of course.”

I jump to my feet. “I will do no such thing!” It’s a gut-instinct reaction—an absurd one if I take into account what will be expected of me in the next

twelve months.

“You’ll do it because I demand it.” Liam’s brow arches in challenge.

My uncle stands, shooting me a look of warning. “Remember your place, dear niece.”

“My place?” I cross my arms, incredulous, and glare at both of them. “And what exactly is my *place*?”

“That would be on your knees,” Liam says, taking a step closer.

“Why? Because you’re the *chancellor*?” I challenge in a scathing tone, knowing full well my mouth will get me into serious trouble with this man if I’m not careful.

“No, my queen. My reasons are a matter of logistics.”

“Logistics?” I say unbelievingly.

“Yes. The position will provide more efficient use of your mouth.”

I turn to my uncle. “You can’t allow this!” The plea echoes, and I’m positive everyone on the first floor hears my outburst.

Rowan sets a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Obedience to the Brotherhood is your duty, Novalee. Kneel before the chancellor.”

I stiffen my legs, refusing to submit even as my eyeballs burn from the impossibility of the circumstances. I want to plead again, but no amount of begging for a different outcome will make the resolution on either man’s face waver.

Because there is no freedom on this island.

No rights as queen of a foreign nation.

No *choice*.

The unyielding weight of my uncle’s grip sends me to my knees. My chest heaves with indignation as Liam towers in front of me, hands at his back, shoulders wide as the bulge behind his zipper taunts me with what I’ll face for the next twelve months.

Twelve men.

Headstrong and virile.

And all of them determined to own me.

Rowan clears his throat. “I apologize for my niece’s lack of protocol.”

I resist gnashing my teeth.

“She’ll learn.” Liam pets my head as if I’m a prized Pomeranian. “It’ll take some time, but she’ll adapt to our customs.”

“Yes, well, I’m afraid Novalee is a very strong-willed young woman.”

“I assure you, that is an issue I intend to address.”

I cast one last pleading look at my uncle, but the stern line of his mouth fails to give me hope.

“I’ll wait in the parlor while the two of you become acquainted,” he says, and I’m helpless as I watch my final shred of hope disappear through the door. It slams upon his exit, and I jump. The ensuing silence is too invasive. Too consuming.

Liam doesn’t move or speak at first. Neither do I. The seconds tick past as I study his dark gray trousers, purposefully keeping my focus below his zipper. His heightened breathing fractures the quiet, the inhales and exhales shallow and gruff, laden with a hint of what I think is desire.

Has anyone ever sounded so…aroused in my presence before? Stood in front of me like this—with masculine power and appeal? Six years ago, Liam did, though now I realize he held himself back in deference to my age.

“Eyes up here.” His commanding tone rumbles through my bones, drawing my gaze to his face, and there’s no denying how gorgeous he is. Strong jaw, neatly trimmed beard, and that coppery hair I remember from six years ago when he scolded the boy with the wild blond hair. This man stood up for me back then, but that won’t be the case this time.

“You’ve come a long way since that child on her knees,” he says as if our minds are on the same wavelength. He smoothes a palm down the back of my head. “It’s okay to be unsure. I know you’re untouched and innocent. I’m honored to be the first to touch you.”

Except he’ll do more than touch me. Once again, my attention falls to his pants and the noticeable outline of his erection.

Erection.

I’m not unfamiliar with the word. I know how the male anatomy works. I even know what’s expected of me. As if to confirm my suspicion, he unbuckles his belt and unfastens his pants.

“Unbutton your top, Novalee.”

My fingers visibly shake as I reach for the first button, and it takes three tries before it slips free of the loop. I undo the next two then look at him for instruction, hoping he’ll allow me to stop at showing cleavage.

“Keep going.”

Gulping past the tightness in my throat, I reveal more skin. The material parts, exposing my satin brassiere. Liam tugs on the blouse, one brow arched in silent command, and I let the top slip off my shoulders.

“Take off the undergarment too.”

The urge to beg is intense, a plea for my modesty on the tip of my tongue, and I hesitate a second too long.

“I don’t issue orders twice,” he says, gripping me by the chin. “I’ll make this as easy on you as I can, but this is your only warning.”

His tone is harsh, stabbing like a knife to my gut, and before he can give the command again—and punish me for it—I remove the last piece of material covering my breasts. A draft of air caresses my nakedness, coaxing my nipples to bud. I’ve never felt more vulnerable than I do now, on my knees and naked from the waist up.

Liam draws in an appreciative breath. “Stunning.” He grabs my wrists and forces my hands to my chest. “Play with your nipples.”

“Why?” I whisper.

“Don’t question me.”

I’m utterly humiliated as I fondle my nipples, gently rolling the sensitive peaks between thumb and forefinger.

“Good girl,” he breathes, reaching for the stretchy material of his boxer briefs. He exposes himself, and at the first sight of his shaft, my eyes bulge.

“It’s big.”

“You’ll learn to take it.”

I don’t see how. He’s thick and long, and his fist doesn’t cover half the length as he folds his fingers around it. I can’t hide a nervous gulp.

“Will you be gentle?”

With his free hand, he palms my face, the brush of his thumb a caress on my cheekbone. “Compared to some of my brothers, I’ll be merciful.”

And that’s where the gentleness of his touch stops.

Fisting my hair, he yanks my head back, and the position angles my face just right, his harsh grip ensuring I can’t escape his hold.

“Please,” I gasp, despising myself for the slip-up. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Your inexperience is what draws me.” He strokes his length, confident in his skill as he moves his hand from root to tip and back again. “Pinch your nipples.”

I follow his command, adding more pressure to the flesh between my fingers. A curious warmth darts between my thighs. I once touched myself, bringing about the same tingly rush spreading through my bones now, but

my sense of embarrassment was too strong, and I stopped before it went any further.

“Harder. Make them ache.”

Maybe if I make my nipples hurt, the warmth between my legs will go away. I press down hard, face tightening from the hot pain radiating through my breasts.

The wet tip of his erection pushes against my lips. “Taste me,” he says, pulling my hair until I dart out my tongue.

He’s salty with a hint of bittersweet, and I’m not sure if I like the taste or not. I lick my lips clean, and then his flesh is there again, pressing against my lips until they part and allow him entrance. My mouth closes around the plump head, and he sucks in a sharp breath between his teeth.

“Jesus,” he mutters. “So sweet.”

And then he starts to thrust, his raspy voice shooting out curt instructions like *suck* and *no teeth* and *gag for me*. That last command confuses me until he pushes toward the back of my throat, and I realize he means to go deep.

Too deep.

Instinct kicks in, and I push my tongue against the hot flesh in my mouth.

“Don’t fight me,” he says with a low growl, pulling out and slapping his dick against my cheek. “My brothers won’t be as gentle and patient as me. They’ll tire of your teasing and take their pleasure from your ass.” He thrusts into my throat again, only this time when the gagging starts, I fight to accept it.

To accept *him*.

“This is for your own good, my sweet girl.”

He sets the tempo with quick jabs, and my chest aches from gagging on his girth. Humiliation clogs my nose, making breathing difficult with the way he’s claiming my mouth. I peek up, desperation a scream on my face, and our eyes meet. His are darker than a moonless night, lids at half-mast.

He seems…entranced. Caught up in a spell. A curious sense of power takes hold of me. I’ve never felt anything like it before.

And I’ve never witnessed anything as beautiful as the surrender in a man like Liam.

His hand tightens in my hair, and with a final jerk between my tonsils, he goes still. “Swallow,” he groans as his hot release spurts into my throat. I choke a little as it slides down. Afterward, he pulls out, and the space

between us is oddly quiet. I'm frozen, my brain struggling to catch up with what just happened.

Because Chancellor Liam Castle just came in my mouth, and I don't know how I should feel about it.

Irate?

Empowered?

Turned on?

Repulsed?

All I am is discombobulated. Eyes burning, I let go of my nipples and wipe the musky dampness of him from my lips.

"Did I satisfy you, Chancellor?" The bite in my tone is front and center, brave and bold.

Instead of taking issue with my attitude, he seems amused, mouth curving into a rogue grin as he pulls me to my feet. "Do you hear me complaining?"

"No," I whisper, cheeks aflame as I lower my gaze to his throat.

He lifts my chin. "Did you enjoy pleasuring me?"

"No!" The denial is too quick. He knows it. I know it.

That grin of his brightens. "Tell the truth, Novalee."

I nibble on my lower lip, hesitating. "It wasn't horrible."

He laughs. "Your honesty is refreshing."

"Do you generally inspire dishonesty in people, Chancellor?"

"It's *Liam*." His tone softens. "The woman I plan to marry will call me by my name. Is that understood?"

"Yes…Liam."

"That's better." His hands are still on me, a thumb brushing the pad of my abused lips, the slide of his fingers in my hair. Now that he's started touching me, he can't seem to stop.

And I can't find the strength to dislike it.

"To answer your question…" He lets a heavy beat pass. "People know better than to lie to me."

I don't know if he means it as a warning, but I take it as one.

Liam Castle is not someone you lie to.

He's not someone you disobey.

And he's definitely not someone you fall in love with.

"So tell me, Novalee Van Buren. Did you enjoy the taste of my cock?"

Cock.

Another word I’m familiar with, though there’s an undercurrent of *wrong* stringing those letters together. It’s bolder and filthier than erection or penis.

It’s raw and filthy and…sexy.

“I…I don’t know. It’s the first time I ever tasted a man.”

“It certainly won’t be the last.” Liam retrieves my clothing from the floor. “Selma will show you to your quarters.”

“My quarters?” I shrug into my top and button the front.

“Yes, you’ll have your own set of rooms on the penthouse floor. We’ll share meals together, of course.” After I’m once again decent, he takes my hand and pulls me toward the door of the library. “Did you not expect to have your own quarters?”

“I thought…” I trail off with a nervous swallow. Liam embodies the spirit of a man in control of his urges and desires, but he also seems like the type of man that wants you at his beck and call, available upon command. “I guess I thought you’d want me to share your bed.”

Jerking me to a stop two feet from the door, he takes me by the chin in what I’m learning is his signature move. “My brothers might wish to share their bed with you, but I’m not a masochist.”

I’m unprepared for the pang of hurt that goes off in my chest, and I respond before weighing my words. “You don’t want me?”

“Who wouldn’t want you, my sweet girl?” He dips his head, bringing our lips a few inches apart, and I breathe in his spicy scent. “But I know my limits when it comes to keeping you pure. Until you are crowned as *my* queen, I’ll have my way with your mouth, but I won’t have you in my bed.”

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Chapter Three

The ride to the top of the tower is excruciatingly slow. I'm barely holding on to my composure. By the time Selma shows me to my private quarters, I'm full-on shaking. I dismiss the maid before scurrying inside, desperate for a moment alone so I can process what just happened on the first floor of this circular fortress.

I don't realize the hot mess of my face until Faye rushes to me, eyes wide with alarm.

"What did that bastard do to you?"

Her vehemence, her unwavering support—it makes me buckle on the spot. I sob into my hands, knees meeting the floor. I'm not even sure why I'm falling apart.

Because Liam Castle got under my skin with a single blow job? It makes little sense. All I know is I'm reeling, and I can't seem to stop.

"Novalee! Talk to us. What happened?"

"I don't know if I can do this." I stare at my ladies through the flood of tears escaping my eyes.

"Was he mean?" Elise asks, cautious hesitation sharp in the lines of her porcelain skin.

Faye is more direct. "Did he hurt you?" She narrows her brows, purses her lips with protective, ball-busting intent. "Because if he hurt you…"

She'll do nothing. We're women in a foreign place that doesn't afford us the same rights as men. They'll say we're weak and not as smart, but at the core of my heart, I know that's not true.

Because it takes true strength and wit to survive a group of men like the Zodiac Brotherhood. Especially with a man like Liam at their head.

"He didn't hurt me."

Faye stands in a fluid and graceful motion, though the harsh angles on her face are anything but. She helps me to my feet. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"But something *did* happen?" Faye never side-steps the blunt questions—the ones that drag you kicking and screaming to the center of the bullseye. I'm pinned there now, unwilling to share what happened with my ladies, but helpless to find a graceful way out of it.

“He made me…” I hold her gaze as Elise stiffens. The two of them are the closest I’ll ever have to sisters, and we’ve talked about sex in the past, but the idea of confiding what Liam made me do, down to the last dirty detail, has my cheeks flaming.

Faye takes my hand. “You know you can tell us anything.”

“He asked me to…go down on him.” Though he didn’t ask, and I’m too ashamed to admit how powerless I was in the moment.

Faye raises a dark brow. “Did you enjoy it?”

“It didn’t…completely…repulse me.”

Elise exhales as if she’d been holding her breath for the last minute. “Don’t tease us. What was it like?”

Internally, I cringe at her noticeable excitement, but that’s Elise—always smiling and keeping things positive. From the day she came to live on our lands three years ago, she’s always been a glass-half-full kind of girl. Though I’ve never had the experience of a broken heart, Elise would be the first to offer a pint of chocolate ice cream and a collection of chick flicks.

Faye would be too busy kicking the ass of the man who’d hurt me to join in on the movie marathon. Between the two of them, they have me covered. I dart my gaze between my closest friends, taking note of their expectant faces, hearing their mutual silent question.

What was it like pleasuring a man like Liam Castle?

Scary.

Exhilarating.

Rough.

Arousing.

Shameful.

“I need to prepare for dinner,” I say, sidestepping the subject altogether.

Faye’s sigh of exasperation disrupts the dark curl teasing her left eye. “Fine. We’ll shelve this conversation for later.” She wants to needle me for more info on the art of oral sex, but she doesn’t. Instead, she turns to Elise. “Lay out a dress for the queen. I’ll draw a bath.”

“Something in black, please,” I tell Elise as I follow Faye into the en suite bathroom. The color’s appropriate for a rebellion, suitable for a funeral. The perfect camouflage to face twelve predatory men over dinner.

Several minutes later, I’m sinking into hot water with a relieved sigh, suds rising over my breasts. My nipples poke through the bubbles, over-

sensitive from the change in temperature, and the chancellor plays on my mind like flashes on a picture reel.

The confidence in his touch.

The command in his voice.

The surrender on his face when he came.

A strong, foreign urge to touch myself ignites inside me. I glance at Faye, who's taken a seat at the vanity, waiting to offer her help should I need it.

What I need is privacy.

"I can dress on my own tonight for dinner. You and Elise should settle into your quarters and get ready."

Through narrowed eyes, she studies me as if searching for everything I'm not saying. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. I just need some time alone."

"Of course."

After she leaves me alone with my lustful thoughts, I waste no time in pushing a hand between my legs. I've never felt so decadent and sinful. Steam rises off my slick skin, and I close my eyes as my fingers explore, increasing the rhythm once I press on the spot that feels especially good. I let those stored pictures of Liam play in my head. Hear his voice in my ears. Pretend the touch of my fingers are his. I flush even hotter, my heartbeat pounding behind my breastbone.

I've never been so close. Instead of shying away, like I did the last time I touched myself, I increase the pressure and speed, imagining the chancellor bracing above me, bare chest grazing my nipples.

He unlocked something deep inside me when he used my mouth the way he did. Something naughty and primal. A yearning that wasn't there before—the need to know what it's like to surrender to oneself.

To surrender to someone else.

I push two fingertips inside my pussy and envision his cock there instead. "Liam," I moan, the plea for more rumbling off my lips.

And that's when someone sucks in a harsh breath.

My eyes flick open.

The man of my fantasies is standing at the foot of the tub, his toffee eyes reduced to slits. Both hands form fists at his sides.

I veer upright, hands covering my chest, and water sloshes everywhere. "What are you doing in here!"

“I live here.”

“But these are my private quarters.”

“You won’t find a place on this island I don’t have access to.” He rounds the tub and hauls me out of the water to stand before him in stunned mortification. “Did you come?”

My cheeks flame even hotter. “N-no.”

Water runs in rivulets down my skin, dripping from my hair, soaking the plush mat under my feet. Blood throbs between my legs, a wondrous itch I can’t scratch. As displeasure darkens his beautiful features, I can’t help but grieve for the climax that didn’t happen. What would it have felt like to tip over the edge?

“Orgasm is a gift,” he says, his grip tight on my wrist as he pulls me out of my suite of rooms and into the shared space of the penthouse. “You’re never to take it without permission.”

I’m shaking as he drags me into his quarters. The dip of the sun toward the horizon casts the space in shadow, and the heavy furnishings give an undertone of masculine virility. A bed designed for a king sits atop a platform in the middle of the room, outfitted in midnight blue. A color fit for royalty.

He ushers me away from the bed and gently shoves me into a seat at a small table in front of a set of French doors. Beyond the glass, I spy a balcony. “You’re not to come in here unless I instruct otherwise. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” I say, teeth chattering. “Why am I here?”

“Lay your hands on the table, palms up.”

I obey, knowing now is not the time to question him. With a decisive nod, he strides across the room and pulls something down from a rack on the wall. My stomach drops upon his return.

“Do you know what this is?”

A hard swallow precedes my answer. “It’s a riding crop.”

“Do you know why your hands are on that table right now?”

Without thinking, I yank them back.

“Do not move them.” The leather end of the crop makes a harsh smack on the table, punctuating his command.

I inch my hands back into position, every fiber of my being urging to me to take flight. But how far would I get? Out of this room? Maybe I’d breach the penthouse door before he catches up with me. Maybe I’d make it into

the elevator, then I could streak through the tower as naked as the day I was born.

“Do you understand why you’re being punished?”

“Because I was touching myself?”

“Because you did it without permission.”

“You’re not being fair. I didn’t know it was against the rules.”

“Discipline is how you learn, Novalee.” He gestures to my vulnerable, exposed palms. “If you move your hands again, I’ll have no choice but to take you to our enforcer for punishment. Trust me, neither of us wants that.”

His threat collides inside me, a fatal crash of anger and fear. Trust him, he says. I want to laugh and cry and scream at the irony in that demand. As he steps back and raises the crop, an ominous preamble, I remind myself that I’ve been through worse.

I needed medical attention and a soft cushion for a week after Uncle Rowan unleashed his whip on my backside for trying to escape.

“You’ll receive five strikes to each palm.” His hand twitches, a millisecond away from inflicting pain, and our eyes lock. “Brace yourself, my sweet girl.”

Smack!

I jump, suck in a breath, and another notch of anger forms on my armor. He brings the crop down on my left palm.

Then the right.

Back and forth, reddening my fair skin.

Causing my eyes to water.

I glare at him through my unshed tears.

Before the fifth and final set, he stops to take a deep breath, and my arms quake on the table, hands burning from his abuse. My soul brims with rage, but underneath that, I’m hurt. I hate that my heart throbs with the traitorous emotion, throat aching from the toll of holding it back.

Because I thought he was different, believing we had a connection despite the reality of our power exchange. Did he not feel it too, back in the library with his cum still lingering on my lips?

He issues the last two strikes, making them count, and my teeth grind from the intensity of the sting. My toes curl with it, muscles stiff.

I don’t dare move my hands.

I don’t move at all.

“It’s over.” He sounds relieved, which is ludicrous because he wasn’t the one suffering a physical punishment. Setting the crop aside, he pulls me to my feet. “I’m not a sadist,” he says, sliding his hand along my cheek. “I don’t enjoy inflicting pain.”

“You get off on the control.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. A hint of a smile? A scowl? He’s so hard to read. “That’s probably true, but next time you’ll think twice before touching what’s mine.”

His words slide over me like a physical caress, and I clench my thighs in response. The hue of his gaze deepens to raw umber.

I swear he knows the effect he has on me.

“I believe you when you say you didn’t come.” His thumb traces the outline of my lips. “Your skin is flushed with the need to orgasm.” He sends a cursory glance at my chest. “And your nipples are begging for my mouth.”

A whimper escapes onto the soft pad of his thumb. I can’t resist darting my tongue out to taste him.

“Jesus, must you test my control?” He pushes his thumb into my mouth, and I suck on it, reminiscent of the way I serviced his manhood. “So innocent, but so responsive. You’re an anomaly, a vibrant orchid in the dead of winter.” He dips his thumb into my mouth three times, playing on my tongue before withdrawing. “Do you touch yourself often?”

“No.”

His nostrils flare. “Have you ever had an orgasm?”

“What do you think, Chancellor?”

“I think you’re going to end up over my lap for refusing to use my name.”

That mental image doesn’t inspire fear in me as it should. “I don’t mean to disobey you.”

“Then answer the question.”

“I’ve never had an orgasm.”

“You’re very responsive for a woman who never learned to pleasure herself.”

“I tried once.”

“Did you not enjoy yourself? Because you seemed to enjoy yourself just fine in my bathtub.”

“It felt awkward then.” I lower my gaze. “Today, it didn’t.”

Today, I had the memory of blowing him as inspiration.

"You're not to pleasure yourself without my permission again," he says, gripping me by the chin. "Is that clear?"

His command shivers through my bones. "Yes."

"Your first orgasm belongs to me. Your pussy is off-limits to your fingers until I decide to give that gift to you."

For the first time since I learned of my fate six years ago, I experience a thrilling sense of anticipation.

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Chapter Four

After dressing for dinner, we arrive on the first floor. The silk skirt of my black dress swishes against my legs as Liam takes me by the elbow and leads me down a wide hallway. I'm entranced by the huge portraits on either side, gawking wide-eyed at the larger-than-life forms of what I assume are the Brotherhood's ancestors.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How did the Zodiac Brotherhood begin?"

He stalls in the middle of the hall, attention on the portrait that has captured me so.

"That's Evangeline Castle. She was my grandmother by several degrees of greatness. And I mean that in every sense of the word." Letting go of my arm, he tangles his fingers with mine, and I hide a wince because my palms are still tender from his punishment. "She was only eighteen when she set sail with a group of explorers. They would have never discovered the island without her unusual skills."

"Unusual?"

He nods toward the portrait of his ancestor. "She knew the nighttime sky better than most men. The constellations and planets, and their position depending on the season. At first, the explorers believed she was a superstitious soul, but after she predicted two potential catastrophes, they started listening to her." He sends a cursory glance down the hall. "She led them here, and by doing so, they escaped certain death in a storm. Got rich in the process too, because the island was uninhabited and abundant with gold."

He wanders down the hall a few paces, pulling me along until we're staring at a portrayal of a group of men from what appears to be the 17th century. "Are these men the explorers?"

"Yes. Evangeline was a progressive thinker. An Amelia Earhart of her time. But they couldn't deny there was something special about her." He tilts his head, and our gazes lock. "There were twelve explorers, one for every zodiac sign."

"That's quite a coincidence."

“We don’t believe in coincidences, Novalee. The explorers didn’t either. Evangeline became their prized queen, shared among the twelve but locked away in a tower.”

“Why did they lock her up?”

“She wanted to leave the island. They didn’t.”

“So she was their prisoner?” Sickness rises in my gut at the thought.

“Their prisoner, their queen, and the mother of their children.”

I gape at him, my mind spinning through the implications of what he just said. “She’s not just *your* ancestor, is she?”

“No. All twelve of us are descendants of Evangeline Castle.”

“But you bear her surname.”

“She took the last name of the explorer born under Aries. Legend has it she favored him the most.”

“So you’re telling me this entire island was founded and bred from one woman? What about incest?”

“Evangeline’s direct descendants have always brought in outsiders to marry. It’s tradition, just as it’s tradition to compete for a queen’s hand in marriage at the start of a new Brotherhood.”

“And how is the new Brotherhood chosen?”

His lips curve into a grin. “You’re full of questions, aren’t you, my sweet girl?”

“I’m just trying to understand it all.” Slowly, we move down the hall once more.

“The Brotherhood shifts power every twenty-five years or so. Each house bears the duty of producing a male heir born under its zodiac sign. Once all twelve heirs come of age, the tradition renews, and a new virgin queen is found.” He gives me the side-eye. “This is privileged information.”

“It sounds like a tradition based on superstition.”

“Men have tested the tradition over the years. The outcomes were never good.”

“How so?”

“Disease and death, mostly. When we follow tradition, we prosper. When we don’t…”

A shiver takes hold of me. Or was that an actual cold draft hitting my back? Suddenly, I wish I’d chosen a dress that wasn’t backless—or at least left my hair down. Gooseflesh erupts on my skin.

“Why is the queen always a virgin? Evangeline wasn’t a virgin to all twelve.”

“She was a virgin to only one.”

“Which one?”

A shadow seems to cross his face. “The House of Leo.”

I’m curious about his issue with Leo, but I don’t want to risk shutting down this conversation. We take a few more steps toward the open doors leading into the dining room, and I wait for the furrow between his dark brows to disappear before asking my next question. “What happens if one of the houses can’t produce an heir?”

“If fertility issues arise, we do whatever is necessary to produce an heir. Surrogates have been used in the past. So have mistresses.”

Something close to possessiveness rushes up inside me, and I imagine the man I’m to marry in bed with another woman. I don’t like that idea at all. And I don’t like that the man in my hypothetical vision is Liam. I’ve only known him for a day, but I’m becoming…attached.

How will I navigate the next twelve months without crushing my heart in the process? The potential for total annihilation is too great. No matter the outcome, someone will get hurt.

Several someones.

“What if a member of the Brotherhood is the one with the fertility problem?”

Liam stops, and the look he gives me is so intense, I’m tempted to take a step back. “That’s never happened, Novalee.”

“That’s…improbable at best and impossible at most.”

“The tradition hasn’t let us down yet.”

He urges me forward, and we arrive at the entrance of the formal dining room where my ladies are waiting. As Faye greets Liam with an air of coldness degrees below her usual aloofness, I suddenly remember my conversation with her before my bath.

The bath.

The one he interrupted and punished me for.

How could I forget, even for a moment, how absolute his power is? He pulled me in with his history lesson in the hall, seducing me with the mystery of the Brotherhood’s origins. Liam stimulates my mind as much as he stimulates my body.

What a dangerous combination.

“Ready to go in, ladies?” Liam gestures for us to enter first. I step into the elaborate dining room, my ladies on either side of me, and take in the circular space. Above a giant round table hangs a massive chandelier. There are no windows in this room, as we’re deep in the middle of the tower on the first floor.

It’s a stifling place, especially with eleven sets of eyes gawking at me from their thrones around the table.

Liam moves us forward, and I realize the table is sectioned into twelve slices. He clears his throat. “I’m pleased to present our queen, Novalee Van Buren and her ladies, Faye and Elise.”

I bow my head in a show of respect. Liam gestures for me to take a seat, then he settles into the chair on my right as my ladies sit on my left. We’re all connected at this table—a continuous circle that never ends.

“Before we make formal introductions,” Liam says, “I’d like to present Novalee with a gift.” He waves a hand at Selma, who crosses to the table carrying a white round box sitting on a gold tray. Liam picks it up and opens the top before setting it on the table.

A humongous diamond ring glitters under the light of the chandelier.

His brown eyes are warm, and there’s a hint of a smile on his lips as he takes my left hand in his. “Every member of the Brotherhood will present you with a gift at the beginning of his time with you. This ring is mine. It symbolizes the Brotherhood’s commitment to you and your duty to us.”

He slides it onto my ring finger, and I can’t help but gawk at the brilliance of the stone. It’s beautiful and weighs down my hand as much as the next twelve months weigh on my shoulders.

But I’ve recently learned that beautiful things come with hard realities.

“It’s stunning,” I whisper.

“So are you.” He raises my hand to his lips, the one he just put a ring on—the one he punished earlier that evening—and places a kiss there.

And he says I’m an anomaly.

Liam is a contradiction of harsh and tender.

“Gentlemen,” he says, facing the men at the table, “please stand and announce yourselves in the order of your houses.”

The man sitting on the other side of Faye rises. His dark hair is cropped close to his head, the line of his nose aristocratic.

“Heath, House of Taurus.”

There’s a stoicism about him that makes me uncomfortable, and I’m already dreading the following month with him.

The next man in the circle stands, and I narrow my eyes as I try to recall how I know him. Technically, I met all twelve of these men six years ago, but this man—with his emerald eyes and easy-going smile—seems especially familiar.

“Landon, House of Gemini.”

Then his smile widens, and I remember. He was the eldest of the twelve, and he *laughed* at me, taken aback by my young age. He still seems to laugh at me, eyes twinkling in some private joke of which I’m not partial.

A man with a blond ponytail takes the floor next. “Vance, House of Cancer.” His smile isn’t as inviting as Landon’s, but I sense a gentleness in him that puts me at ease. Vance reclaims his seat, and my attention lands on the man next to him.

His blond hair sticks out in careless abandon, and his rumpled clothes make me think he fell out of bed and threw on the first pair of jeans he found. There’s an air of haughty boredom about him as he rises to his feet.

I’m taken aback by the hostility in his blue eyes. They bore into me, and I remember the way he taunted me the first time I met him.

“Sebastian, House of Leo.”

The lion. I should have known. I expect him to settle into his seat again now that he’s introduced himself, but he doesn’t.

“How do we know she hasn’t spread her legs already?” the lion asks, directing the question at the chancellor, though his obvious distaste of my existence shreds to the soul. My jaw hangs open, and I’m about to object when Liam squeezes my knee in a silent command to stay quiet.

“Watch your mouth, Sebastian. The queen has done nothing to earn your scorn. She deserves your *respect*.”

“Respect is earned. Isn’t that what our fathers always told us?”

“I’m done with this conversation.”

“But you never answered my question, *Chancellor*. Just because her uncle promised us a virgin doesn’t mean she hasn’t fucked half the male population of her nation.”

Liam slams a fist onto the table. “Enough!”

Vance clears his throat. “Tomorrow, I’ll conduct an exam to confirm her virginity.”

“And what about her willingness to cooperate?” Sebastian says. “I have no interest in babysitting a brat.”

The rage wafting off Liam is tangible. “Her obedience has been tested.”

“I need my own reassurances.” Even as he says the words, I sense Sebastian is only trying to provoke the chancellor.

“Then you’ll get your damn reassurances,” Liam snaps. “Tomorrow, during the examination, you’ll all have the chance to confirm her virginity and test her willingness. Satisfied?”

Sebastian smirks. “For now.” He settles into his chair with a vibe of smugness that pokes at my indignation.

I’m barely present, my mind spinning in righteous anger at the man whose aqua gaze is still burning a hole through my armor.

A chair scrapes the floor, and a voice startles me to attention. “Let’s get back to the introductions, shall we? I’m Miles, House of Virgo.”

Then the next stands. “Pax, House of Libra.”

One by one, the remaining members of the Brotherhood arise and announce their names and zodiac signs…as if I’ll remember them all after the argument that just took place.

As if I can concentrate on anything but the festering hatred of the man sitting six seats to my left.

Determined to do just that, I force my gaze on each man as he stands, studiously ignoring the lion and his display of contempt.

“Ford, House of Scorpio.”

“Tatum, House of Sagittarius.”

The houses of Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces close out the round of introductions.

Oliver.

Hugo.

Sullivan.

Twelve gorgeous men, dressed in everything from expensive Armani to Levi denim, and at this overbearing roundtable of testosterone and power, only one other thing besides the zodiac unites them.

Me.

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Chapter Five

“Time to arise! The sun is shining, and it’s a warm day.” Movement draws my eyes open, and I find Selma parting the floor-length drapes, allowing the light of day to spill into the room. I hide my face in the soft pillow with a groan.

“Did you not sleep well?” she asks.

“Not really.” What an understatement. After Liam escorted me to my suite last night, pressing his lips to my forehead in a brief kiss goodnight, I tossed and turned for hours, my mind galloping ahead with memories of my first day on Zodiac Island.

Liam’s confident control.

Sebastian’s casual cruelty.

“Chancellor Castle is expecting you on the main balcony in twenty minutes.”

I veer up in bed too fast, making my head woozy from the rush of blood. Selma enters the adjacent closet that’s bigger than most people’s bedrooms, and I spy my clothing hanging on racks and taking up the space on the shelves. She slides several hangers to the side, apparently searching for something specific.

“Where are my ladies? They usually help me dress.”

“The chancellor wishes not to be disturbed today. He gave them the day off from their duties.”

I slide out of bed and frown, not liking his high-handedness. Selma exits the wardrobe room, clutching a white negligee that leaves little to the imagination. That scrap of material definitely didn’t come with me to the island.

“Chancellor Castle wants you to wear this to breakfast.” She drapes it over the back of a burgundy lounge chair, the dark suede leather offering a stark contrast to the purity of white.

“And if I don’t?”

“Well, that’s your choice, but just know the chancellor doesn’t let disobedience go unpunished.”

I fist my hands, remembering the sting that disappeared overnight during my fitful sleep, though the phantom of the burn lingers.

As Selma makes my bed, I grab the piece of lingerie and escape into the bathroom.

Several minutes later, after a solitary pep talk, I stand in front of the full-length mirror with my dusty rose nipples on display in the fitted lace cups. The skirt flares down to my knees, giving a false sense of modesty because the material is sheer, and underneath I'm wearing a thong. My long hair is my only option for modesty, so I arrange it over my shoulders to cover my breasts.

When I return to the bedroom, teeth freshly brushed and bladder emptied, I find the room deserted and as clean as it was upon my arrival yesterday. The curved outer wall is a wondrous panel of oversized windows that reveal a breathtaking view of the sea, and just like in Liam's quarters, a set of French doors opens to a balcony.

I wander to the glass, brushing my fingers against the spotless surface, and wish I could stay inside this private sanctuary all day, safe from the lustful attention of a man who makes me feel shameful things.

But a glance at the clock startles me into motion. I spent more time in the bathroom than I realized, and now I'm already ten minutes late.

This isn't good.

It's the only thought bouncing around my head as I rush through my private sitting room and into the main part of the penthouse. The scent of food—a mixture of cinnamon and sausage—wafts through the open doors of the balcony where I find him sitting alone at a table.

"I assume Selma told you twenty minutes?" He doesn't look at me as he asks the question, and the nature of his nonchalant tone makes me nervous.

I'm tempted to lie, but I don't have it in me. Not with him. "I'm sorry. I lost track of time in the bathroom."

He finally raises his head, his brown eyes a rich caramel from the warm sunlight. A slight breeze disturbs my hair, causing my nipples to poke through the strands. His attention lowers to my chest, and a furrow forms between his brows. Scooting his chair back, he picks up a wooden serving spoon from the table, and I stiffen, assuming he's going to use it to punish me. Instead, he uses the thin handle to secure my hair into a messy bun atop my head.

"Bend over the table," he says, gesturing to the end free of breakfast clutter. When I don't move to follow his command, he takes me by the

elbow and leads me to where he wants me, and I feel him behind me as I splay my hands on the smooth surface. My breasts smash against the wood.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I have zero tolerance for tardiness.” His shoe nudges the inside of my foot. “Spread your legs.”

“What are you going to do to me?” I ask, voice shaking as I widen my stance.

“Not what I’d like to do.” His fingers graze the back of my thigh, and slowly he lifts the skirt, bearing my ass cheeks to the temperate spring air. “If you were mine to fuck, I’d take you right here on this table.” He pauses, and I sense the heat of his gaze on me, spreading gooseflesh down my back.

I shiver, though whether from the mild temperature or Liam’s words, I don’t know.

“If you were mine,” he says, pressing into my back as he brings his lips to my ear, “I’d get you worked up enough to beg, but I wouldn’t let you come.” He tucks the skirt around my waist, leaving my backside vulnerable to his every whim.

I swallow hard. “I won’t be late again.”

“When I say twenty minutes, I mean twenty minutes. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Since you’re still learning your boundaries, I won’t use my belt this time, but you’re getting a swat for every minute you were late.”

The idea of his hand on my ass turns my insides to molten desire. “A total of ten?”

“Eleven, Novalee.” His warm palm settles on my right cheek, fingers squeezing the flesh there. “But I wonder, my sweet girl, will my hand punish, or will it turn you on?”

I’m already turned on, but hell will ice over before I tell him that.

His palm lifts from my ass, and a second later, he lands a sound smack. I jump, unable to hold back a yelp because his hand hurts more than I thought it would. He lands another, and another, each one escalating in force. Gnawing on my lower lip, I fist my hands against the table, hoping to find the strength to get through the last half of the spanking.

His hand comes down again, and I can’t help but cry out. “You’re hurting me.”

“Yes. That *is* the idea behind a corporal punishment.”

“But it was only ten minutes!”

“It was eleven.”

Whack!

A pitiful whimper escapes my lips. I never knew a spanking could be so painful, could humiliate to this degree. My face burns, undoubtedly as red as my ass.

He issues the last strike—an especially harsh blow of his hand—and then he makes me sit on my hands at the table.

“Now you’ll wait eleven minutes before you eat.” He reclaims his seat and casually lifts his coffee cup to his lips.

“Why are you so cruel?” He’s better than this, better than Sebastian and his caustic personality. I’ve seen it.

Liam meets my angry gaze, and I think I detect an apology there; one he doesn’t want to give voice to.

“What you call cruelty, I call consistency. As the first in this tower to spend time with you, it’s my job to make sure you know your boundaries.” He pauses, and a beat passes, laden with importance. “I’m not being cruel, Novalee. I’m arming you against those who will take discipline and control to especially Draconian levels.”

Fear flourishes in my gut, unstoppable. It’s a weed I can’t control. An invasive sickness I can’t cure.

“You’re scaring me,” I whisper past the aching lump in my throat.

“I’m scared *for* you.”

“Why?” I ask, running through the events of the previous day, and the introductions at dinner. “Is it Sebastian? Is he dangerous?”

“Sebastian should be the least of your worries, my sweet girl.”

“Then who should I be worried about?”

“Truthfully? All of us, myself included.” He blinks, and something close to hesitation crosses his face. “I’ll do my best to prepare you, but I can’t protect you after you leave my house.”

“Why not? Aren’t you the chancellor?”

“My power only goes so far. Every man in this tower has authority over you until the auction.”

“But I get no say in who I marry, isn’t that right, *Chancellor*?” The title slips out, as does the testy note in my tone. I don’t apologize for it, or take it back—I’m too angry at the situation that’s been forced upon me.

He grips me by the arm and hoists me out of the chair. “Is your ass not red enough, my queen?”

His threat does little to put me in my place, which is where he wants me. I'm too busy recalling the warmth of his hand on my backside. His punishment was painful, but the memory of it doesn't overshadow the way this man makes me feel when he puts his hands on me.

"You don't scare me, Liam Castle."

"That makes one of us." He releases my arm, and the warmth in his eyes deepens as he pulls the impromptu hair stick from my bun. My blond locks cascade around my shoulders, free for the tangle of his fingers.

"How do *I* scare *you*?" It's a preposterous concept that this strong, confident man fears me.

"You behold more power than you realize." His breath dances on my lips, suddenly quick and shallow. Three eternal seconds pass, heavy with mutual yearning.

Then he slams his mouth on mine with a groan. A gasp escapes me as I part my lips for his insistent tongue. His kiss, deep and consuming, sears me to my soul. I whimper into his mouth, fingers clutching his suit jacket as heat ignites between my legs.

I've never been kissed until now. Have never known what it means to burn for a man until Liam lit the match.

He groans again, and I reciprocate his vow of surrender. He lifts me onto the table amid rattling china and settles between my thighs. His hands are in my hair, his hot, open mouth devouring the column of my throat, cock hard and snug against the wet center of my innocence.

I don't feel innocent anymore. I'm wanton with sin, wrecked by lust. An accusing pang attacks my heart because I'm not being honest with myself.

Lust could turn into more.

I could grow to love him, and that scares me more than anything he could do to me on a physical level.

He yanks the sheer cups of the negligee down, and his thumbs brush over my nipples. "Touch yourself like you did in the tub yesterday."

"You're giving me permission?"

"To touch, yes." He veers back and holds me captive in his stare. "Not to come." He pushes my hand between us, urging me to dip my fingers beneath the barrier of scant panties.

A moan slips free, and our eyes lock as I grip his shoulder. His are beautiful, sensual and deep, surrounded by thick lashes. The way he watches me makes my breath stall.

“Are you wet for me?” His hand covers mine, adding pressure to that magical spot I found yesterday, alone in the tub.

“Yes.”

Our hands move in tandem, creating an exquisite fire-inducing friction. The kind of friction that has me breathless and unable to stop.

“Liam.” His name fights its way through the vice around my throat.

“Say it again,” he whispers.

I groan his name as I graze the pinnacle, and that’s when he yanks my hand out of my panties, leaving me throbbing as blood rushes toward the dam.

“Please,” I beg, delirious and floating in a foreign headspace. I try returning my hand back to the center of all that pressure and heat, but he won’t let me. I’m breathing too hard as he brings each of my fingers into his mouth.

He’s *tasting* me.

Making me whimper with each dart of his tongue.

Shooting pulsating need to every nerve ending in my body.

“Please,” I say again, voice a quivering sigh.

“Begging won’t get you what you want.”

“Then what will?”

“Patience.” His answer splashes ice on my flushed skin.

“Do you enjoy torturing me?”

“If it makes you ache for my cock, then yes. I enjoy torturing you.” He steps back, and I slide to my feet. “Hurry and eat your cold breakfast. We can’t be late for your medical examination.”

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Chapter Six

The room is large yet claustrophobic, made up of four windowless walls. Several paintings of the sea are on display, and the cabinetry is made from distressed wood—a sandy tone that complements the ocean theme. The decor is designed to evoke an informal vibe, to soothe and calm, but that's impossible because twelve chairs form a circle around the examination bench.

Liam urges me forward. "We don't have much time before everyone arrives." We stall in front of the bench, and he slides his palm along my cheek. "I wish this was just a medical exam, but it's much more than that. My brothers will touch you, Novalee."

"Please don't let this happen." Not like this, in front of him with the memory of his kiss fresh in my mind.

"I need you to cooperate. Things will go quicker and smoother if you do." His thumb inches toward the corner of my mouth. "That also holds true for the months after you leave me."

An entire year of this, followed by a lifetime of servitude to the man who wins my hand in marriage. If the man is someone like Liam—kind and just no matter the punishment he unleashes—the marriage might not be too horrible.

But if someone like Sebastian wins the auction…

I shiver at the thought.

Liam takes a step back and gestures at the ankle-length skirt I chose to wear. "Undress from the waist down."

A ball of sickness lands in my gut. Losing my modesty in front of him was hard enough; undressing for twelve sets of eyes is unfathomable. I pull the waistband down my legs and step out of the material. I'm not wearing panties since he told me not to.

He picks up my skirt and hangs it on a hook on the wall. "Hop up."

Bracing my hands on the bench, I lift my ass onto the leather, legs dangling over the edge. "Do all twelve of you share dinner every night?"

"No. Last night's dinner was in your honor. We'll hold a dinner at the start of each new month for you."

Another tradition.

But I'm glad I won't have to face them every day.

The door opens behind me, sending a wave of dread down my backside. It chills me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, and my skin pebbles with gooseflesh. Liam takes a seat on my left. I bow my head, and from the corner of my eye, I spy the members of the Brotherhood filing in and settling into the chairs surrounding me.

When I raise my eyes, I find Sebastian staring back. His eyes are the most alarming shade of blue I've ever seen—a brilliant azure. He's brazen in the way he's watching me.

I press my naked thighs together, clinging to my last thread of modesty. Because there's no escaping his scrutiny. My skin flushes, chasing away the chill in my bones.

Next, I steal a glance at Liam, but his attention fixates on Sebastian, eyes dark and shooting daggers—a cocktail of jealous anger. The chair to the left of Sebastian remains empty. Instead, the doctor—from the house of Cancer—halts in front of me without preamble.

"Lie back," he orders.

I do as I'm told, fitting my feet into the stirrups he pulls out, and a whisper of air caresses my inner thighs, bringing about a violent shudder. Driven by modesty and instinct, I bring my knees together.

"Knees apart. I can't examine you otherwise."

I hesitate too long, and he pries them open, putting me on display for half the room to ogle. I study the ceiling as shame burns my throat. No one's ever looked at me down there, let alone touched me.

Not even the family doctor.

Not even Liam when he pressed his hand over mine during breakfast.

"Teresa, come over here, love," the doctor orders a maid standing in my periphery. "The queen could use your hand."

"Yes, Master Vance."

I keep my gaze trained on the ceiling as footsteps scurry to my side. A warm hand enfolds mine, fingers squeezing in silent support.

"This won't take long," Vance says as he settles between my knees. At the first touch of his fingers spreading my nether lips, I grit my teeth. Teresa gives my hand another squeeze, sensing my discomfort, and I think we both hold our breath as the doctor gently pushes a finger inside me.

I wish I had a clock to watch, hands counting down each excruciating second, or even a speck on the ceiling to focus on as Vance violates my insides. But there's no escaping this. I bite my lip as my feet tremble in the

stirrups. The man is a doctor, and I'm aware that women go through this every day, but considering the circumstances, I feel utterly violated.

I didn't ask for this. I didn't even give my permission.

"Almost done," Teresa says.

My head lolls to the side, and unbidden, I find Sebastian. His jaw is an unshaven line in a face cast from strength and sensuality. But those azure eyes…

They burn right through me. Or maybe they're burning for me.

As we lock gazes, his nostrils flare. A tick goes off in his jaw. I wish I had a decoder for this man—this silent man whose stare somehow tells me more than words could give away.

There's more to him than disdain and anger.

He. Wants. Me.

The realization plays on the heightened air between us, and the spell isn't broken until Vance finishes the exam.

"The hymen is fully intact." He pushes off on his chair, wheels rolling across the gleaming marble as he waves a hand in Liam's direction. "Chancellor, the floor is yours."

Teresa lets go of my hand and disappears into the periphery, her stance by the door becoming that of an unobtrusive spectator.

I suck in a breath and hold it as Liam settles between my thighs. Keeping his gaze averted, he inserts a finger into me, and it's the first time he's touched me like this. I despise that he's doing so under the watchful attention of eleven other men.

His face is carved from granite, and I sense the control he's holding on to. Without ceremony, he withdraws his hand and steps back before gesturing for Heath to go next. "Proceed."

Heath barely touches me at all. He doesn't offer me more than a passing glance either.

Landon, from the House of Gemini, breaks the ice first. "You were young all those years ago, and I won't lie. I was skeptical, but you've matured, haven't you, Novalee?" His tone is conversational. Not surprising for a Gemini, I suppose.

"I have."

"Do you mind if I touch you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You have a valid point, my queen. I'd still like your permission."

“I can’t in good conscience give it, but you have my dubious cooperation.”

“You are a feisty little spitfire, I’ll give you that,” he says with a laugh. “I’ll have to take your word and the testimony of my brothers as proof of your purity.” He reclaims his seat, and Sebastian stands, the next in line since Vance was the first to test my virginity during the exam.

“You heard the queen,” Sebastian says with a smirk. “Her cooperation is questionable. I want her restrained.”

Liam scowls. “That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is.” Sebastian snaps his figures at Teresa. “Fetch me a set of wrist and ankle cuffs from the dungeon.”

I shoot a startled look at Liam. “There’s a dungeon?”

He winces. “I was hoping to spare you from that information until later.”

“Why is there a dungeon?” The question shrieks through the room.

“It exists for pleasure,” Liam says.

“Don’t coddle her.” The man I remember only as Libra snickers. “The dungeon is primarily for punishment, so keep that in mind, my queen, lest you end up in my hands.”

I’m close to having a panic attack by the time Teresa returns with a set of leather cuffs. Sebastian wastes no time is fastening my wrists and ankles to the bench legs. He tests the anchors holding me captive, then he circles me, just like he did all those years ago.

“If you’re the merchandise, and I’m a prospective buyer, I think a little due diligence is in order.” He stalls by my head, his smirk tangling with Liam’s deepening scowl.

I can almost taste the animosity between them, and suddenly, I know this isn’t about me. These two have unresolved issues, and I’m the pawn standing between them.

“Open your mouth, princess.”

“What are you doing?” Liam growls.

“Exercising due diligence. If she becomes my wife, I’ll require great head every morning.”

“I assure you, her oral skills are top-notch,” Liam says through clenched teeth.

“Your assurances mean shit to me.” Sebastian brushes his thumb across my lips. “Open.”

I do, and he thrusts his fingers inside my mouth until his knuckles hit my teeth, making me heave relentlessly.

“That’ll be a tight fit for my cock.”

I bite down on his fingers, and he yanks them out of my mouth. “Sounds to me like you’re overestimating size,” I say, glaring at him.

Someone laughs.

Sebastian isn’t amused. “Good luck finding a woman with that complaint.” He wanders to the end of the bench and stands between my spread legs. “Is your cunt as tight and pure as you claim?”

“Why don’t you violate me and find out,” I snap, tone dripping with scorn.

Someone laughs again. “She’s got an attitude, that one.”

I don’t know who’s finding amusement at my expense, because I haven’t torn my eyes from Sebastian’s. As he reaches between my thighs, pushing two fingers against the tight resistance of my innocence, his sea-blue gaze ignites.

My chest rises with a gasp, and I bite my lip when he presses his thumb on my clit. Out of all the hands that have invaded my innocence today, his is the one to drag a reaction from me. I pulse around his fingers, my body flooding with warmth and begging for his touch to go deeper.

To break past the barrier of purity and claim me.

He rubs circles on my throbbing nub, and I’m horrified by the moan that bleeds off my lips.

“That’s enough!” Liam’s voice thunders through the room.

I startle from the sound, but Sebastian doesn’t react at all, other than to withdraw his fingers and stalk away, out of sight.

But not out of mind.

I listen to the thud of his retreating footfalls, followed by the slam of a door.

He just left.

Without a word.

Without a second thought.

Because I’m inconsequential to him. Someone he likes to toy with to get a rise out of his rival. His touch lit me on fire, but he felt nothing.

“Does anyone else need to continue with this charade?” Liam’s voice reverberates through the room, a possessive warning to back off.

“No, chancellor. I think we’ve seen enough.” Landon leaves the room first, and one by one, the others follow. I let out a breath of relief as the door closes behind the last member of the Brotherhood.

Liam remains quiet as he unfastens the restraints. He hands my skirt to me, and I dress as the tension between us grows.

“Are you upset with me?” I ask, wishing I could wipe away the wetness between my legs.

Wipe away the evidence, erase the memory of Sebastian’s touch.

“Why would I be upset with you?”

Heat flushes my face, and I can’t meet his eyes. “Because of my reaction when Sebastian touched me.”

“You can’t help how your body responds, Novalee.”

“But you seem angry.”

“I’m angry at myself.” He rakes a hand through his copper hair, disrupting the perfection. “I shouldn’t have allowed this to happen.”

“You said it yourself—you can’t protect me.”

“I can’t protect you from my brothers, but I can protect us both from getting too emotionally involved.”

“What do you mean?”

“What happened on the balcony today?” He pauses, and the air thickens with the memory of our kiss. “It can’t happen again.”

“You don’t want me?”

“We already went over this. My attraction to you isn’t in question. But I’m not the only one who wants you.”

“I know the number of men who want to marry me. That doesn’t mean they want *me*.”

They only want a queen to fulfill the tradition. A conquest.

“One does.” He takes me by the chin, a tender edge to his touch. “And by the way you looked at him, I know the attraction is mutual.”

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Chapter Seven

Sixteen days.

Sixteen agonizingly long days that somehow pass too quickly. I spend the majority of them hiding in the penthouse, afraid of running into someone who *isn't* Liam. But I can't escape the irony, because Liam's been avoiding me the way I've been avoiding Sebastian.

We barely see each other, except for meals. Those we share, minus the skimpy lingerie.

And he doesn't touch me.

At all.

I know he wants to.

"This is fantastic," Faye says, studying my hasty sketch of an evening gown. The dress is backless with a mermaid skirt, and though it's done in charcoal, I envision a midnight blue, like the bedding in Liam's quarters.

"It's okay." I grasp a pencil and start on another sketch. "The skirt could use more flare."

"I think it's perfect." Faye sets the drawing on top of the others. "Elise would say the same thing."

Elise is touring the island with a prospective suitor, and Faye and I are sprawled on two lounge chairs in the main sitting room. Just because Liam has locked himself away in his quarters doesn't mean I have to.

And if I'm honest with myself, maybe I'm hoping to see him since a meeting at Zodiac Headquarters detained him all morning. He's been in his office ever since he came back, clinging to the distance growing between us.

"You're too critical of yourself," Faye says. "You could start a clothing line with these."

It's a subject we've talked about before. No doubt, it'll arise again because Faye is loyal and supportive. Bold and opinionated. Where I capitulate, she forges ahead, refusing to let anyone stand in her way.

She wants the same for me, as one of my ladies and a lifelong friend.

"She's right," Liam says, his deep voice startling me. I drop my pencil and turn around to find him standing in the archway that leads into the formal dining room. He saunters to the table and picks up a drawing. "You've got natural talent. You should pursue it."

“Maybe I would if the twelve of you weren’t passing me around.”

Faye gasps. “Novalee…”

She’s not used to hearing me disrespect someone of authority. I’m not used to it, either.

Liam frowns. “I need to see you in my quarters.” Without another word, he turns on his heel and leaves.

I push up from the lounge. “We’ll continue this another time.”

“Is he going to hurt you?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Uncertainty lines her face.

I hide my own apprehension because I’m not sure what to expect from Liam. We’ve existed in this penthouse for the last couple of weeks by exchanging curt, polite conversation. But there’s more between us—so much more—and the knowledge has only festered.

Now he’s demanded my presence in his private quarters, and I don’t know whether I’m elated or intimidated.

“It’s okay, Faye. You should take the afternoon.”

I exit the sitting room before she can object, but when I reach the heavy door blocking my entrance to the place where he sleeps, I stall, fist poised to knock.

Is he going to spank me again for my attitude?

Use his belt this time?

The latter causes my stomach to cramp.

I’m not ready to discover the harsher side of Liam.

I don’t have a choice. Something has to give because he can’t kiss me the way he did then ignore me the entire month of my stay in his house. I rap on the wood, my knuckles hitting harder than I intended. He flings the door open, and I slip past him, entering his formidable domain.

“Do you know how to play chess?”

His question catches me off-guard, and I whirl to face him, eyes wide in disbelief. “Chess, as in the *game*?”

A smile quirks on his lips. “Yes.”

“I thought you called me in here to punish me.”

“Oh, I did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Answer the question. Do you play?”

“Yes.” Not very well, but I don’t divulge that information. He’s already got enough advantage on me.

“Shall we?” He gestures toward the table in front of the French doors where a game of chess awaits. As we each settle into a seat across from the other, I study him, trying to figure out what his true game is.

Because there’s no way it’s chess.

Since I’m sitting on the side with the white pieces, I take the first turn by moving a pawn forward two squares. “Your move, Chancellor.”

He brings a pawn forward. “You’re craving my hand today, aren’t you, my sweet girl?”

The thought of his warm palm on my bare ass does strange things low in my belly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Moving a knight, I feign innocence.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” He follows my lead, and his knight jumps over one of his pawns. “You’re getting mouthy with me because you’re upset over the distance I’ve put between us.”

“How intuitive of you.” I slide out another pawn.

“You feel rejected.”

“That’s not true.”

It really is true, and I hate myself for the weakness. I didn’t expect to feel this way, but I do, and it’s causing chaos in my head. We advance several more pawns, losing casualties along the way, and then I move my queen, paying no attention to strategy.

When it comes to him I have no strategy.

His castle takes my queen.

He settles back in his seat, chin resting on his fist. “Take your time.”

Letting out a sigh of frustration, I weigh my options. I could take his queen in two moves, but he’d only block it. The seconds tick past as I study the board, searching for a winning course of action I haven’t yet found.

His patience is never-ending. He sits in that chair as if he owns it—because he does, and he owns me in this game. Just as I’m about to move my bishop, he breaks the silence.

“If you win, I’ll make you come.”

His promise tingles through my limbs, stirring excitement in my veins and flooding hot liquid to the apex of my thighs. I raise my gaze to his, taken aback by the desire in those sexy brown eyes.

“Are you trying to distract me?”

He shrugs. “Just providing incentive.”

The promise of his hands on me is motivation enough…if I thought I could win.

But I won’t, and he knows it.

“You tease me, Chancellor.”

His mouth twitches at the purposeful slip-up. “I’ve got you in two moves.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I know how to play the game, Novalee.”

He sure does. He brought me in here to dangle the forbidden fruit in front of me, only to yank it out of reach. I send my knight jumping two squares forward and one to the right, and just as he promised, he puts me in check. There’s only one spot for my king to go.

And after I take my turn it’s game over, because he has me cornered.

“Is this your idea of punishment?” I move my king into inevitable surrender. “Watching me lose?”

“We haven’t gotten to your punishment yet.” Liam slides his queen into position. “Mate.” His eyes tangle with mine, rife with heat. I fail to breathe, overcome by the seducing quiet between us.

“You won,” I say with a hard swallow.

“I did.” He rises, blatant longing playing on his face, and holds out a hand.

I slide my palm along his, my body tingling from anticipation. I’m nervous and scared all at once. He’s not as put-together today, with his hair in slight disarray and cufflinks removed, sleeves pushed to the elbow. He leads me up the three short steps to the bed and orders me to bend over the end. As I drape the comforter, I’m acutely aware that this is where he sleeps.

Alone.

Probably naked.

Does he pleasure himself between these sheets?

Does he think of me when he does?

“Spread your legs.”

Heartbeat doing double time, I part my thighs. He lifts the back of my skirt, and I hear him suck in a breath.

Because I’m not wearing panties.

“Jesus, Novalee.”

I want him to touch me. Badly. Obsessively. It's all I've thought about for the last sixteen days while he shut himself away from me.

Protecting us both, he claims.

"Please," I whisper, arching my spine.

He splays his hand where my ass cheeks meet, the tips of his fingers dipping close to where I want them.

So close.

But he doesn't move. His hot and heavy palm lingers on my bottom, just a tease. A promise. My heartbeat thunders in my ears, booming one… two…three times.

Then he smacks my ass.

There's no yelp or cry of pain. Only a whimper of need as his palm connects with my flesh again, softly and with purpose, those fingers teasingly close to the spot that aches for him.

I'm on fire, turning to ash for this man.

"Please," I say again as my limbs shake.

"What are you begging for?"

Everything.

I can't verbalize what I want, unable to form the words. Because they're a foreign plea on my tongue.

I want to come.

He smacks me again, fingers grazing the wetness between my legs.

He knows what I want, and he's toying with me.

I *need* to come.

It's rising inside me, as forceful as a tsunami. As tremendous as the sea itself.

"Is this what you want, my sweet girl?" His fingers plunge, sliding through my arousal, and he holds them there as I writhe.

"More," I groan.

His thumb pushes against my anus, adding enough pressure to make me go still. He's cupping me, refusing to give me more. His torso blankets my back, and he yanks my head up by the hair.

"How quickly you forget. You lost the game."

"Please," I whine, unable to take in a full breath.

Not with the way my heart gallops.

Not so long as his fingers press against my clit, unmoving. A relentless taunt.

I choke out his name, and he shudders, breath hot and raspy on my neck.

“You don’t know the level of control I’m clinging to right now.” Slowly, his thumb invades my backside, burning…burning…

I whimper again, this time from pain.

“You’re sexier than any woman I’ve been with. Fully innocent and too damn responsive. I know what the glove of your mouth feels like, Novalee.” His thumb gains another inch, and I cry out in agony. “My cock is dying to know what this feels like too.”

“Stop!”

Immediately, he pulls away. For several moments, I brace against the bed, chest heaving, terrified by what he implied as his thumb violated my ass. Footsteps thud across the room. A chair scrapes the floor. I push off the mattress and face him.

“Some of my brothers won’t stop.” Darkness shrouds his gaze, accompanied by a crease of anger between his brows. “They’ll use your ass, and there isn’t a thing I can do to stop them, Novalee.”

His statement shakes me to the core, spoken with harsh truth and a hint of helpless frustration, and I almost crumble. “I don’t want to leave you.”

Abandoning his chair and the distance between us, he frames my face in his warm hands. “But you must. Our time together is dwindling fast. I *need* you to behave yourself. Heath won’t tolerate your attitude.”

“I’ll try.”

“You’ll do more than try.” His voice thickens, deep with a warning. “Because the next time you speak to me with such disrespect, I won’t leave you with a throbbing pussy—I’ll leave welts on your ass. Is that clear?”

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them back. “Y-yes.”

“You may return to your quarters. You’re to stay there until dinner.”

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Chapter Eight

Liam's threat plays in my head on a nerve-wracking loop. His harsh words struck me in the heart, bringing about an inescapable melancholy that's only exacerbated by the rain. I try to escape my impending reality by visiting the boutiques on the main part of the island with my ladies.

The thing about reality? It's rarely avoidable.

So is the rain attacking in a torrential downpour. The relentless precipitation has been a steady annoyance for days. We return to the tower drenched and all shopped-out. The bodyguard Liam insisted on—a stoic man with muscled arms and a thick neck—opens the door of the main entrance, and my ladies and I spill inside, dripping rainwater everywhere.

"Today wasn't the best day for an outing," Faye says, letting the bags she's holding drop to her feet.

"It's as good a day as any." Elise sets the rest of our haul on the floor. "Jerome says it rains at least 250 days out of the year here."

Jerome is the wealthy businessman who's been courting Elise for the last few weeks.

Faye rolls her eyes. "Jerome this and Jerome that."

Elise shoots her a rare scowl. "You don't have to be catty about it."

"Sorry," Faye says, sheepish. "I'll try to rein it in."

Selma appears from the kitchen. "The chancellor would like to see you in the library," she tells me as she hands out towels to the three of us.

"Do you know why he requested to see me?"

"It's not a request. I don't know his reasons."

I dry my hair, patting down the combination of strands and braids, and a tingle of wary excitement rushes through me. Ever since our chess game, things have become more strained, teeming with undeniable sexual tension. He hasn't sought me out at all.

Until now.

I part ways with my ladies and take the journey down the long hallway. My dress sticks to my skin from the rain, but I forgo a trip to the penthouse to change first, much too eager to see Liam. As I pass the portraits of the Brotherhood's ancestors, the portrayal of Evangeline Castle draws my focus. What must it have been like to be in her position, locked away and used by twelve men? Did she grow to love any of them?

One?

Two?

Three or more?

I can’t fathom falling in love with two men, but I can’t deny I’m attracted to both Liam and Sebastian.

The latter makes zero sense.

I turn down another hallway, and that’s when I realize I took a wrong turn. As if my thoughts conjured his presence, Sebastian’s raspy timbre filters into the hall from an ajar door on the left.

“Fucking gorgeous, Mona.”

A feminine voice murmurs something in response, words indiscernible, and I slow my steps, drawn to what lies beyond that door. Every bone in my body bids me to keep going, to not look into that room and lay eyes on him. To not give him another opportunity to unleash his cruelty on me.

Apparently, I’m a glutton for punishment. Holding my breath, I peek around the edge of the doorframe, and the depraved sight before my eyes knocks the air from my lungs. Breath escapes me in a silent whoosh.

A woman is spread out on a lounge, her deep burgundy locks flowing over creamy, bare breasts. It’s the pose that has me in a trance. Her legs are bent, splayed in repose, the shaven lips of her womanhood on proud display. She’s without shame or modesty, and something about her confidence calls to me.

Sebastian has his back to me as he transfers the likeness of her onto his canvas, and I can’t help but study the broadness of his shoulders, or the way his dark blond hair sticks up in dishevelment.

He’s the polar opposite of Liam.

Brazen where the chancellor is reserved.

Carefree instead of controlled.

Unrestrained sexy compared to Liam’s more classic dark looks.

Sebastian’s low-slung jeans steal my attention as his brush hits the canvas with confident strokes. The man paints as well as he fills out a pair of jeans.

“Bash,” the woman says, and when I turn my attention back to her, I find her deep brown eyes on me. She points in my direction, and Sebastian turns around before I can duck into the hall.

The instant his blue eyes meet mine, I’m frozen, caught red-handed, cheeks hot with embarrassment. A lifetime seems to pass in the lock of our

gazes. My pulse speeds up. His brows narrow. I run the tip of my tongue along the seam of my mouth, and when his attention stalls on my lips, I can't help but tuck the bottom one between my teeth.

He frowns, sets down the paintbrush, and that's when I spring into motion, darting down the hall as fast as my jittery legs will carry me.

But footsteps chase me, accompanied by deep and harsh breaths. A large, warm hand clamps around my bicep and yanks me to a stop. I turn slowly, every tortuous beat of my heart sounding-off in my ears as I face the accusation in his brilliant stare.

"Did you get a good eyeful?"

"I-I didn't mean—"

"Didn't mean to spy on me?" he cuts in, invading my personal space. He's not as tall as Liam, but his presence is overbearing enough. As I try to retreat, his fingers dig into my arm, making escape impossible.

"I wasn't spying."

"Does Liam know you're down here?"

"Yes." Though I'm sure the chancellor wouldn't be happy to find us in our current position—his hand gripping my bicep as my bosom heaves against his chest.

The furrow between Sebastian's brows deepens. "I'm surprised he let his little pet roam free."

"He requested my presence in the library."

"This wing is off-limits to you. It's reserved for my public studio."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Well now you know."

"It won't happen again."

"Make sure it doesn't." He lets go of my arm, and I miss the warmth of his touch, which is crazy because he's treated me with nothing but disdain every time we've crossed paths.

But I can't deny I'm alive from the intensity in his gaze, the seriousness of his brow, the way he's clenching those large hands. I imagine them gripping my thighs and flush even hotter.

What is wrong with me?

It's not like me to become so tongue-tied in the company of a man.

But maybe that's the problem—Sebastian isn't some average guy standing in front of me. He's one-hundred percent alpha with a legal and binding claim on my life.

He’s the kind of man who paints naked women for fun.

And in four months, he’ll have total dominion over my body.

A shudder tears through me, laden with arousal at the unwelcome thought. As if he senses my reaction to his nearness, he steps forward again, crowding my personal space. Inch by inch, he pushes me against the wall. My spine bumps against cold stone, and I gasp as something hard presses into my thigh.

Sebastian is sporting an erection, and though he was just painting an attractive nude woman not five minutes ago, I’m positive his hard-on is for me.

“You might as well make yourself useful since you interrupted my session,” he says, voice a sexy murmur as he sifts my blond locks through his fingers.

“What do you mean?”

“Provide me with a little inspiration.” His body is hard against mine, tempting my soft curves to mold to the contour of his muscles, the planes of his abs.

I stare at his lips. “I’m not taking my clothes off for you.”

“You could wear your hair instead. It’s amazing.”

The compliment is unexpected, and I stutter out a thank you.

“I’ve wanted to paint you from the moment I first saw you.”

I blink, and in that millimeter of a second, I imagine myself sprawled in front of him like the woman he left in the other room. No clothing, legs open to his gaze as he captures how he sees me on canvas with bold, sure strokes.

No exam bench or hostility.

No other men.

But would he see me as a girl or a woman? Something tells me he’d see me as the latter.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you? Would you spread your legs and let me paint your cunt, princess?” His eyes are alight with amused curiosity, but the vulgarity of his words spark the opposite in me.

“Let me go,” I demand, pushing against his chest.

The amusement fades from his expression, and he separates himself from me in the space of a second.

As if I burned him.

“Forgive me,” he says. “For a moment there, I thought your fully formed tits meant you’d grown out of the child queen I met six years ago.”

Indignation takes hold of me. The last thing I want is for him to see me as a child. “I’m eighteen now.”

“Like I said. A *child*.”

I resist the urge to stomp my feet and argue with him, as I’m sure that sort of behavior will only prove his point. “You’re insufferable. Why do you have to be such a jerk?”

With a sigh, he takes another step away from me. “It’s in my DNA, princess. You’re too innocent to see it for what it is.”

“I’ll kindly remind you I’m a queen.”

His lips twitch with renewed amusement. “No reminder needed. I’ve got plenty of pressure from my family to ensure a marriage to you.”

“You don’t sound happy about it.”

“I’ve accepted it.”

“Am I not what you expected?”

His gaze travels the length of my body, heating me all over again. “No, my *queen*. I expected a prim and proper child less appealing than a nun. What you are is innocence wrapped in the body of a porn star.”

I grit my teeth. Rising to his bait will only heighten the tension between us because Sebastian is fire and passion rolled into one impossibly gorgeous, unstable male. Movement catches my attention, and a glance over his shoulder reveals his gorgeous subject standing in the doorway of his studio, her body wrapped in a black satin sheet.

“Are you coming back, Sebastian?”

The very essence of her is sinful, and I’ve never envied another woman until now. Her attention shifts, and when I follow the direction of her gaze, I find Liam standing in the shadows of the hall, arms crossed and mouth grim with displeasure.

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Chapter Nine

Dinner is unbearable. Tense and silent—only the scrape of flatware on china breaks the disquiet. He said he's not upset with me.

Sebastian's the target of his anger.

But deep down, I don't believe him.

"Why did you want to see me in the library today?"

For the first time since we sat down at the table, his eyes flick up to meet mine. "Heath needs to fit you for your crown."

I blink. "What crown?"

"It's Heath's gift to you. There will be a coronation after the auction."

His words are a stark, painful reminder that my days with him are numbered.

"I rescheduled the meeting. He's coming to the penthouse tomorrow." He gives me a pointed look. "You need to be on your best behavior."

"Okay." I go back to pushing manicotti around my plate.

The ensuing seconds eat away at my composure, and I tap my heel against the floor. The food is flavorless as it slides down my throat.

"I can't stand the thought of them touching you."

Startled by his confession, I raise my gaze to his. "I can't stand it either."

With the exception of one.

The tick in Liam's jaw tells me he knows it too.

"You're attracted to him." Not a question, but a fact that sketches jealousy across his face.

"I'd rather be here with you than with anyone else."

"You only say that because my brothers are unknown territory to you. You're scared of the unknown."

That's probably true, but there's no denying my attraction to Liam, or the connection I feel with him. It's been there from the beginning.

More silence stews between us.

Heavy with the things we've said.

And the things we don't.

"Tomorrow's my birthday." His announcement fractures the spiraling tension, offering a welcome change of subject.

"How old will you be?"

"Twenty-four."

“Do you have plans to celebrate?”

“All of them involve you and the many things we shouldn’t do.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” I ask, barely breathing.

“I’m not a patient man, Novalee. You’ll leave my house in a few days, and I won’t be allowed to touch you for the next eleven months.”

“But you’re the chancellor.”

“Yes, my word holds the most authority on policy and business decisions, but the Brotherhood’s contract regarding you is outside the scope of that. My only advantage is having you first.”

I gnaw on my lip, afraid to voice my next question. “What happens if you do…touch me…when I’m under someone else’s authority?”

“Touching you without permission?” He rakes his fingers through his hair. “Corporal punishment, at the least…”

“And at most?”

“My right to bid in the auction could be revoked.”

My mind flashes to yesterday when Sebastian had me against the wall. “Is that why you’re furious with Sebastian? Because he touched me?”

“He crossed a line, but he didn’t engage in a sexual act with you.” He pauses a beat, fingers tapping his annoyance on the table. “That’s me showing my penchant for jealousy.”

I like that he’s jealous. It’s a shameful thing to admit, even to myself. “What constitutes a sexual act?”

“Jesus,” he mutters, letting out a breath. “Touching your breasts or other intimate areas, kissing, using you for pleasure…” He raises his eyes to the ceiling as if praying for fortitude. “Straight up sex.”

“Liam.” The softness of his name on my lips brings his focus back to me, and I feel my face redden with heat. “I want those things with you.” It’s a brazen confession—one I can’t believe I put into words.

“If I touch you…*really* fucking touch you…I don’t know how I’ll keep my hands to myself until the auction.”

Dinner is forgotten between us on the table, cold and tasteless. The only thing I want to taste is him. I pull up the memory of his cock in my mouth, and the resulting ache is so intense that I squeeze my thighs together.

“What’s going through your head?” he asks as if he senses the direction of my thoughts.

“That first day in the library, when I was on my knees…” I pause, hesitant to continue. “I was thinking of how I’ve wanted to do it again.”

Muttering a curse, he stands. “You can’t help but tempt me.” He picks up our plates and heads toward the kitchen where Selma waits, out of earshot to give us privacy. “I have some work to finish before bed. You should get some sleep too.”

That’s the last I see of him all evening. I take a bath with the latest fantasy novel I’m caught up in, but not even reading about dragons and curses distracts my mind from Liam Castle.

I’m tempted to slide my hand between my legs to find relief, but I don’t.

Because he forbade it.

And I want that first with him.

I want him to take it so the others can’t.

I want him to win the auction, too, so the others have no chance of stealing my virginity.

Sleep doesn’t come easy. I toss and turn for hours, wracked by images of twelve sets of hands touching me, punishing me, using me for their pleasure.

The reality is terrifying, the pictures in my head irrevocable. I’m certain I’ll be up all night plagued by duty and destiny…

Until the bed shifts, and I realize I dozed off. At first, I think I’m caught between that weird moment between deep sleep and the more restless, partially alert variety. The kind of slumber where you twitch and it feels like someone’s sitting on the bed. It’s an eerie sensation, feeling a phantom weight when you know you’re alone.

Except…I’m *not* alone.

With a gasp, I lurch upright, and a firm hand sends me sprawling to the mattress again.

“Do you know what time it is?” Liam’s voice hovers only inches away in the darkness, his tone infused with the lustful rasp I crave.

I swallow hard, caught off-guard. “The middle of the night?”

“It’s past midnight.”

His speech is off, slower than usual and lacking inhibition. If I couldn’t tell by his mannerisms, the spiciness of whiskey in the air is telling enough.

“Are you drunk?”

“I never drink to excess. I’m merely armed with the right amount of celebratory scotch.”

“What are you celebrating?”

“My birthday.”

My gaze darts to the nightstand and the green glow of the numbers on the clock sitting there. It's past midnight, indeed.

I make out the outline of his face in my darkened quarters. "Happy Birthday, Chancellor."

The bed shifts again as he sits on his haunches, and then his hands are on my chest, knuckles skimming my ribs as he tears my pajama shirt from breast to navel. Buttons go flying. He lifts me long enough to remove the ruined top, and my nipples peak as if expecting the heat of his gaze.

The warmth of his mouth.

The pinch of his fingers.

His hands drift over the sensitive buds, and I can't help but arch into his warm palms.

"Have you touched yourself without my permission, Novalee?"

I moan a "no," my body begging for more. Begging for what he's refused to give me.

"If I make you come, I want something from you in return. Consider it a birthday request."

"Anything."

"For the next eleven months after you leave my house, I want your word that you won't touch yourself when you're alone."

"What if I'm ordered to touch myself?"

"That's out of our control. But what you do when you're alone…" He braces himself above me and dips his head, mouth grazing my ear. "That's up to you, and I want you to promise me your fingers won't come in contact with your beautiful pussy."

"You'll make me come?"

"All night long, my sweet girl."

I shudder in the circle of his arms. "What if I'm thinking of you when I touch myself?"

"Those are fighting words." He groans, and then his mouth covers mine, the weight of his body pressing us into the mattress as he plunders my mouth. I thrust my fingers into his thick hair, pulling at the strands as I wrap my legs around his waist. The position brings us together in an explosive way, his hardness against my softness.

Tearing away with a painful groan, he crawls to the end of the bed and grabs my ankles. Next thing I know, I'm sliding down the mattress. He hefts me over his shoulder and carries me from my quarters to his. The door

barely makes a sound as it shuts us away, alone, in the one place I'm not allowed.

The place where he sleeps.

The place he swore he wouldn't have me until after we're married.

He pushes his pajama pants down his legs and kicks the clothing free. I freeze, ogling his glorious naked body. Guided by moonlight, I take him in from the definition of his biceps to the muscular build of his thighs.

And everything in between.

Breaths shallow and thready, I dart my tongue out to wet my lips. His nostrils flare, and a low growl emanates from his throat. He's at his most base self, raw and animalistic and struggling to hold himself in check.

"If it weren't for the contract," he says, fisting his hands at his sides, "I'd make you bleed for me. Only me, Novalee."

But there *is* a contract, and we're both bound by it.

He takes a step closer, eating up the inches between us, and the spiciness of his cologne infuses my nose. His rough breathing fills my ears. I crane my neck to meet his eyes.

"I'm yours…however you want me."

"I want you naked."

He issues the demand with soft-spoken patience, but I sense the urgency in him as I remove the last of my clothing. It's the same desperate need rushing through my veins, heating my blood to boiling. As soon as we're both without clothing or shame—without reservation or doubt—I drop to my knees and put my mouth on him. I don't think about it. Don't question it.

All I know is I've longed to taste him again.

His fingers stab through my hair, and instead of pulling me closer, he yanks me back. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"I want to watch you come first." He pulls me into his arms and carries me up the platform to his bed. "Do you trust me?"

My answer is immediate. "Yes."

He sets me on the edge, and I brace my hands behind me, my focus glued to his every move. Standing between my thighs, he wraps his hand around his cock. The vision of him, cast in silhouette from the night, conjures the likeness of Adonis, the god of beauty and desire.

Because he’s full of both and the keeper of seduction as he rubs the head of his shaft between my folds, spreading my wetness.

His trophy.

“Liam,” I groan as my strength flees, leaving me trembling and unable to prop myself on my arms. I fall to the mattress and clutch the bedding. My skin flushes hot.

Too hot.

I’m about to combust.

“What are you doing to me?”

“I’m keeping your body pure. Your head and heart are another matter.”

With one hand, he braces above me and angles his mouth over mine. The glorious friction between us intensifies. Sweat and lust drench my skin, and I can barely form a thought. All I can do is moan his name against his lips, over and over again as the head of his cock rubs me to madness.

“Liam!” Back bowing, I fist the blanket, and my upper body rises off the mattress. Everything below the waist is owned by him.

“That’s it,” he groans. “Come on my cock. Come on it hard, my sweet girl.”

He doesn’t stop the friction until the last intense wave releases me. I’m floating on some ethereal cloud of completion when he pulls me up by my noodle-like arms.

“Down,” he says with a nod to the floor.

Too wrecked to stay on my feet anyway, I slide to the floor, knees buckling, and he pushes into my waiting mouth. The combined taste of us is a taboo treat on my tongue. I’m delirious as he thrusts his way to release, smashing the back of my head into the side of the mattress. I splay my hands on his thighs, nails biting into his skin.

Because I’m trapped, sandwiched between the mattress and the furious need driving his cock into my throat.

“Damn,” he chokes out, followed by another string of expletives that launch from his lips. A shudder seizes his muscles, thighs going tense under my hands.

Then he surrenders, his grasp on my hair a painful burn as he shoots his seed down my throat.

And I never thought I’d witness the day when Liam Castle would cry out my name.

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Chapter Ten

Naked bodies. Satin sheets. A decadent sense of satisfaction when I open my eyes and find his gaze on me. I stretch, sliding my leg between his. “What time is it?”

“Almost lunchtime.”

I’m not surprised since we were up until the wee hours of the morning discovering each other’s bodies. I now know that nibbling on his earlobe makes him hard. Running a hand down his abs to his belly button makes his breath stutter. Dragging a finger along the length of his cock makes it twitch.

Putting it in my mouth makes him lose his mind.

I made him lose his mind more than once.

He discovered things about me, too. Things I didn’t know about. Like when he traced my areola, and it tickled instead of aroused. Or how anticipation shook my bones when he trailed his tongue up my inner thigh. How soft and silky his hair was in my fingers as I clutched him between my legs.

How I pulsed on his tongue for what seemed like forever.

It was a magical night—one I wish had never ended—because the faint ticking of his watch is a constant reminder that time doesn’t slow down for anything.

Rolling me to my back, Liam presses me into the mattress. “How am I going to let you go?”

“Don’t let me go.”

“You know I don’t have a choice.”

“Will I see you…after I leave?” My finger traces a path over the curve of his shoulder.

“I’ll make sure you do.” A shadow darkens his features. “But we’ll have to keep our hands to ourselves. We definitely can’t do this.” He presses his warm lips to mine, tongue seeking entrance, and I sigh into his kiss.

How will I make it eleven months? It seems like an eternity.

Liam breaks the kiss, and I ask the question that hurts my heart the most. “What if you don’t win?” I can’t bring myself to think of the possible outcomes. All twelve of them.

How can it be anyone *but* him?

“I don’t want you to worry about that now.” He holds me by the chin. “A lot can happen between now and then. You could fall in love with someone who isn’t me.”

A contemptuous blue gaze invades my mind, unwelcome and unwanted.

“You’re the one I want.”

“I’m the one you’re comfortable with. You haven’t had the chance to get to know my brothers.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you having second thoughts about winning the auction?”

“No.” His thumb plays on my lower lip. “But if I’m not who you want by the time the auction arrives, then I won’t compete to win.”

“Am I not worth fighting for?”

“You are, my sweet girl.” He pulls away and sits at the edge of the bed. “But your happiness is worth more to me than winning.”

I sit up, tugging the sheet to the top of my breasts, suddenly unsure and shy. He didn’t take my virginity last night, but he might as well have. He stole a piece of my soul I’ll never get back. “I want it to be you, Liam.”

“If you still feel that way eleven months from now, I’ll do everything in my power to ensure it’s me.” He stands and takes a step forward, keeping his back to me. “I need to shower and dress. You should do the same. Heath will be here in an hour.”

He disappears into the bathroom and shuts the door, and it’s like a wall coming down between us all over again.

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Chapter Eleven

Dressed in a black chiffon skirt and a sleeveless top, I perch on the lounge in the main sitting room. By all appearances, I'm prepared to face the day, makeup flawless and hair silky smooth. Anyone sending a cursory glance my way would think I was ready for this meeting with the man who will reign over me in the coming weeks.

But I'm not.

"Stop your fidgeting, my sweet girl." Liam gently scolds me from his chair.

Only then do I realize the rhythmic bounce of my foot, one crossed over the other. I cease the nervous movement just as Selma appears in the archway.

"Chancellor, Mr. Bordeaux is here to see you."

Liam nods. "Send him in."

She steps out of view, and the man I remember from the dinner and medical exam takes her place. He's taller than Sebastian, but a few inches shy of Liam's six-foot frame. His expensive black suit, meticulously pressed, doesn't have a wrinkle in sight. There's an undeniable seriousness about him…and a coldness that makes me shiver.

His hazel eyes zero in on me. "My queen."

I dip my head. "I'm unsure of how I should address you."

"Mr. Bordeaux will do." He waltzes into the sitting room and settles next to me on the lounge.

Liam hasn't moved an inch. He's as stoic as the man next to me.

"I assume the chancellor informed you of the reason behind this visit?"

"Yes."

"Yes, *Mr. Bordeaux*," he corrects, mouth sloping into a frown. "And I expect you on your knees when you greet me in the future." He shoots Liam an irritated glance. "In fact, she should be in that position now."

His words raise my hackles, and before I attempt to form a response, Liam cuts in.

"You don't have that kind of authority in this house."

"Soon enough, my queen." Heath removes a ribbon of measuring tape from his pocket. "I need to take your measurements." He gestures to the top of my head, and I remain still as he wraps the tape around my skull.

But I’m quaking on the inside and trying to hold it together. In a few days, Liam won’t be around to protect me from this man.

“Does my queen have any design requests?” he asks as he marks the measurements in a black portfolio.

“Your queen does not.” I can’t help it—the snarky edge sneaks into my tone before I can stop it, and I sense Liam’s sigh rather than hear it. The displeased pull of Heath’s dark brows sends dread through me, and I rush to temper my tone. “But thank you for giving me the option.”

He shuts the portfolio with a decisive *snap*. “Chancellor, I believe you’ve been lax in handling Miss Van Buren.”

Liam hasn’t moved from his position. Sitting to my right, chin in hand, he watches with hooded eyes that hide any hint of what he’s thinking. “I’ve handled her just fine.”

“Her attitude is unacceptable.”

“We have differing views on what’s acceptable.”

Heath stands with a scowl. “She needs a training session in the dungeon.”

“That won’t happen while she’s in my house.”

Heath swivels his attention between the chancellor and me, jaw rigid and cold, hazel eyes squinting with frustration. “That will be the first thing she receives when she comes to mine.” He strides out of the sitting room, and when the front door of the penthouse slams upon his exit, I startle.

Liam rises. “I can’t let your behavior slide.”

I bow my head in shame because he warned me. “I’m sorry.”

“Apologies won’t save you from the dungeon, and they won’t spare you now.” The sound of a belt buckle lifts my gaze. I’m stricken as I watch him slide the thick leather strap from his pant loops.

“Liam, please.”

“Take off your skirt.”

I blink back tears as I slide the waistband down my thighs. The light material pools around my feet and I step out of the puddle of chiffon.

“Climb up,” he says, waving at the chair he just vacated. He loops the belt in his fist. “You can hold on to the back for support.”

“*Please*,” I beg again as the tears spill.

“Do as I say!”

His thundering baritone destroys the last of my composure, and I bawl as I climb onto the chair. It’s not the threat of pain that bothers me the most.

It’s the betrayal storming through me, devastating my heart in its violent path.

I embrace the cushioned back as his steps carry him closer. Those purposeful footfalls stall behind me, and he sucks in a deep breath. I wait, muscles quivering as gooseflesh crawls down my naked backside.

He promised welts if I misbehaved again.

He said it’s a matter of consistency, so I know the first strike is coming.

He’s a man of his word.

More seconds slip by, and I hold my breath as the salt of his betrayal drips down my cheeks.

Still…the first strike doesn’t come.

“Goddamnit, Novalee.” Something thumps to the floor.

I’m frozen in my vulnerable position, scared to believe he changed his mind.

“Get down.” His voice is soft, defeated.

A sob of relief escapes me. I turn to face him on shaky limbs, cheeks bathed in tears as I wrap my arms around myself. “You couldn’t do it.”

“No.” He takes me by the chin. “The thought of hurting you sickens me.” His grip tightens, incongruent with his words. “Heath doesn’t suffer from the same affliction. His rules are rigid, Novalee. He’ll hurt you when you break them.”

“Why?” The question is little more than a hoarse whisper. I clear my throat. “Why would he want to hurt me?”

“It’s just who he is.” He lets go of me and takes a step back, putting three feet of space between us. “And he won’t budge. Once he’s set his mind on something, there’s no undoing it.” His regretful gaze darts in the direction of the chair at my back. “He won’t change his mind about the dungeon.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“You have to.” He’s shaking, composure in tatters as he drags a hand through his hair. “And once you do, I can’t protect you.”

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Part two of The Zodiac Queen is coming December 10, 2019!
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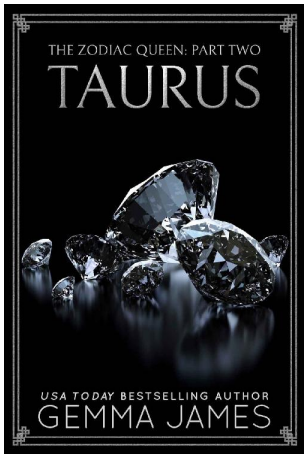

Twelve men. A virgin queen. One arranged marriage.

Twelve diamonds.
That's the number of precious stones in my crown.
And when I break one of Heath Bordeaux's stringent rules, I lose one.
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No one can save me from his reign.
Not even Liam Castle.

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NEWSLETTER

Want to know when the next book comes out? Sign up for my **newsletter** so you never miss out on new releases, other book news, and ARC opportunities! You can also join **Gemma's Naughty Nook** (a private Facebook group for fans) and like my **Facebook author page**.

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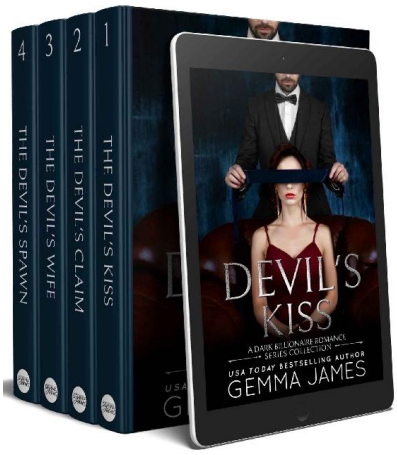

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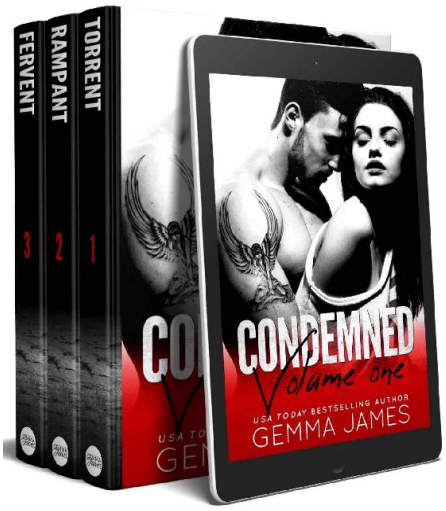

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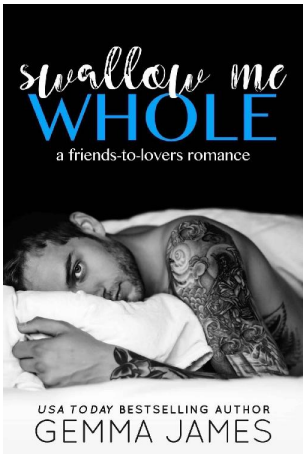

SEXY FRIENDS-TO-LOVERS
She's my sister's best friend. The girl I've known since grade school. The girl that's off-limits...and she wants me to teach her how to blow a guy.

[Grab your copy of Swallow Me Whole]

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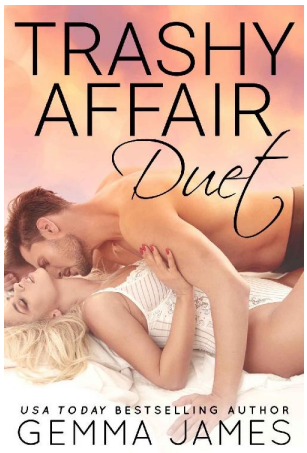

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He's flying home to confront his cheating wife. She's running from her life in shame. Neither expected to fall in love 35,000 feet in the air.

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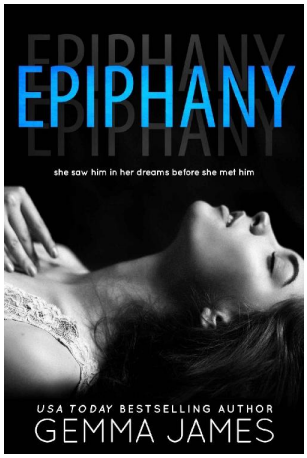

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TOP 10 SONGS ON THE ARIES PLAYLIST

1. “Kings and Queens and Vagabonds” by Ellem
2. “Winter Bird” by AURORA
3. “Between Wind and Water” by Hael
4. “Wolves” by Selena Gomez
5. “I Found You” by Ag Silver
6. “Destroyer” by Phantogram
7. “California Dreamin’” by Sia
8. “Outnumbered” by Dermot Kennedy
9. “Teardrop” by Civil Twilight
10. “Heartless” by Dermot Kennedy

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Thank you to the readers and bloggers who make writing the stories in my head worth the sweat and tears. My muse has been playing around with the zodiac concept for a couple of years now. This past January, Novalee's story started forming in my head. For the first time in months, I felt gut-jittery excited about an idea. Thank you so much for jumping into this new series with me. I hope I've done Aries justice enough that you'll stick around for the long haul.

A few wonderful ladies deserve a special mention for their support and encouragement in creating Aries: I'd like to give a huge thank-you to Jaulisa for her candle magic. I can't tell you how much the gesture moved me. Thanks to Christine for your help on the proofreading. Aries reads smoother because of you. And thanks to Ashley for reading the early chapters and giving feedback. I miss your face!

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Lastly, I have to give a shout-out to my Naughty Nookers in Gemma's Naughty Nook. Here's to no drama, fantastic reads, and a community where we lift each other up instead of tearing each other down. You guys are the best!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma James is a USA Today bestselling author of a blend of genres, from new adult contemporary to dark romance. She loves to explore the darker side of human nature in her fiction, and she's morbidly curious about anything dark and edgy, from deviant sex to serial killers. Readers have described her stories as being "not for the faint of heart."

She warns you to heed their words! Her playground isn't full of rainbows and kittens, though she likes both. She lives in middle-of-nowhere Oregon with her husband, two children, and a gaggle of animals. You can connect with her online at the following places:

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